

Lay Practice

by Rebecca Dixon

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Tonight's dharma talk is about Lay Practice. I assume we're all lay people here tonight, not living as monastics. This is important because the Buddha initially envisioned his teachings as suitable only for those who chose secluded lives, practicing 24/7. Fairly early on, though, the Buddha saw that lay people were drawn to his teachings and wanted what he was offering – at least in part.

He outlined a simplified way of living that was suitable for people who maintained homes, called "householders." His guidelines fit with parenting, work schedules, health maintenance – whatever occupied laypeople's lives. There are three parts to this program Buddha outlined. In Pali they are called: *dana*, *sila*, *bhavana*. *Dana* = supporting teachers, *Sila* = observing ethics, and *Bhavana* = the mind-training *practice* that we do.

Back then, and even now in Asia, people would focus for 10 years on *dana*, then a decade on ethics, and *then* practice meditation, or making an effort to observe and guide the activity of their minds. *Bhavana* is contained in three parts of the Eightfold Path: Concentration, Mindfulness, and Wise Effort.

We'll start where the Buddha did, with *dana*. You've probably heard or read a lot about it lately. It's important. When I was in Thailand, I saw people line the streets in the dark for the monks who would come at dawn with their empty bowls to be filled with food.

Without *dana*, monastics would starve, and then who would there be to teach the laypeople? No sanghas, no one to go to with questions or just learn more about the teachings. In the West, we've tried to use this model, but it's hard in a culture so driven by profit, price tags, and bargain hunting. Sellers want to get the consumers' money, and buyers want to keep as much of it as they can.

Today, here in Alameda Sangha, teachers follow the monastics' tradition of freely offering the teachings. This does not mean the teachings are free. There's an interdependence between our teachers in this sangha and those who come to hear the dharma.

Dana is how you, personally, encourage teachers to keep teaching at your sangha. Without this reciprocal generosity, the sangha will fail. Low dana tells a teacher the evening did not go so well. If people praise the talk but don't practice dana, it feels to teachers like they haven't succeeded. For one thing, we teachers still haven't made people understand what generosity and the practice of dana is.

These evenings aren't like broadcast TV where you pay by just having commercials. The teachers and the Steering Committee do their work to offer you the dharma and practice guidance, and it's up to you to do your work, in turn, by offering dana.

All three aspects of lay practice take effort. Nowadays that effort in practicing dana is when you go to Venmo or PayPal or whatever, and fill out the forms and click the transaction through, or you get together an envelope and stamp and mail a check to Kathleen who'll send it on to the teacher, and the interpreters.

This effort focuses the mind so that while you're sending money, your mind can do other things. First, you get to watch yourself cling. That is so valuable to your happiness. If you don't know when and where you cling, it's hard to stop doing it, even knowing it's the root cause of your dukkha, or mental suffering. For most of us, this is an intro to seeing how we cling.

I've practiced generosity for over 30 years and I still get to see that, whoa – I have stingy tendencies. So, I explore that feeling of reluctance to give, and try to open my heart. I actually envision my heart relaxing, and I can feel this opening happen.

In this first part of practicing dana, deciding to give, the Buddha said the donor's heart becomes joyful and glad. That joy is the result of this expansion of the heart.

If you want to feel this, you need to be mindful as you are preparing to give, then actually giving, and then afterwards. Feel the effect this process has on you. It's different than paying a bill, this giving freely. It can and will feel uplifting, when you practice dana mindfully.

In the second part of dana, *while* we're giving, the Buddha said the donor's mind is clear, inspired. If you don't recall ever feeling that clarity and inspiration, it may be that you're not looking at the right time, the time between the heart's opening and your acting on it. That's a

crucial time. It's when you practice *letting go*. You relinquish your clinging to what has been "your money," and let it become someone else's.

To do this, it helps to remember *why* you're letting go of this money – because you're developing generosity, opening the heart, *and* supporting the sangha and its teachers. This sangha has lost teachers because our dana has been so low, threatening the sangha's future.

You also need to consider how *much* you should give. There are no price tags in this dharma shop. To determine the amount, you probably automatically consider your income, savings and budget. And that's perfectly appropriate!

You decide what the teachings are *worth* to you. Just understand that's what you're doing. Alameda Sangha's Steering Committee may soon offer guidelines, but ultimately the practice is to make your decision mindfully, bearing your purpose in mind. Your intention is to cultivate generosity, so within the limits of your finances, *be generous*.

Once you've decided how much to give, then you have to actually transfer it to the teacher. In-person meetings let you just drop cash or a check into a basket. Now you have to go online. If you can't do that, you can mail the money to Kathleen, who'll forward it to teachers.

Try to do this staying mindful of whatever bother you feel about navigating the internet and using whatever app, or about gathering an envelope and stamp. I have a terrible time with Venmo. I try to stay aware of that frustration and annoyance, and let those feelings go.

When dana has been given, the Buddha says the mind is gratified. You have realized and appreciated that you *want* to give, and the mind was glad. Then you decided how much was right for you to give, and you've done what that took. The mind was clear. You have dealt with any lingering dukkha and there's no attachment left for you. The mind is satisfied, free of clinging. That is the practice of dana.

Now let's look at **Sila**, or ethics. In the Eightfold Path, it's Wise Speech and Wise Action. For laypeople, the elements of sila are laid out in the first *five precepts*: avoid killing, harmful speech, stealing, abusing sexual energy and abusing intoxicants. That's killing, speech, stealing, abusing sex and abusing intoxicants.

Like *dana*, *sila* is based on kindness, the understanding that all beings suffer, and the desire to ease that suffering. If you took my course on the Eightfold Path, you might remember this kindness is in the first two parts of the Path: Wise Understanding and Intention.

Kindness. It's good for us all. When I feel kind, my heart glows. It's sort of a tingling sensation of delight. And, kindness causes me to act in ways that I feel *good* about, and not bad, or regretful. It makes life way more pleasant and I live with greater ease, at least because I'm not making enemies.

The five precepts give us ways of being in the world that are less self-absorbed. They don't just improve our relationships with others, though. They act as little flags that remind us to be mindful in various situations, and think about how we behave, preferably *before* we behave.

For example, my neighbors have a lot of fruiting trees, and on my daily walk I pass figs, apples and oranges, and my brain will sometimes tell my hand to reach out for them. But they're not mine, and they haven't been freely offered by their owner. So being mindful of the precept against stealing, I refrain from picking them. *Until* they fall off the tree and roll onto the sidewalk or into the street, away from their owner's property.

Setting this limit for myself took some thinking and mindful practicing with the precept, exploring what ownership means. Sometimes there will be a box of apples or figs sitting on a wall, and I know those are freely offered. We each have to investigate how we apply the precepts, and this takes mindfulness.

Each time we encounter a situation where a precept applies, it reminds us to be mindful how we act. The precept against killing is usually extended to any kind of physical harming, and some people include making others *afraid* of being hurt. Many live as vegetarians or vegans.

Both precepts about abusing sexual energy or intoxicants also require a lot of thought. When is flirting alright? How much wine with dinner is OK? These are questions we have to answer for ourselves, and investigating our feelings about these questions inspires a lot of growth.

The ethics of speech are extremely complicated. There's a story about a group of nuns, one of whom almost never spoke a word. This made a visitor uncomfortable, until she learned this nun was practicing with Wise Speech. I usually learn most about this precept when I regret something I've said. Silent retreats are great opportunities to watch what we want to say.

Years ago I took a 5-month course on the precepts. Each month we all wrote out our feelings about how to apply each precept. Then we would meet and share our processes. It really expanded my understanding about how I want to live in this world, and that continues to guide me.

There's little I need to say now about **bhavanna**, because most of you *have* a practice. You've probably heard and read a lot about mindfulness, and practice it, perhaps also concentration. The third part of practice set out in the Eightfold Path is Wise Effort. This is the practice of closely observing what it is you think or do that causes you dukkha, and doing that less and less until you don't do it anymore.

If you want to learn more about Wise Effort, go to the course I offered on the Eightfold Path in 2018 to 2019. It's on my website, RebeccaDixon.org, at the bottom of the home page under Foundation Courses. That's also where you can find my dharma talks, and practice dana.