The Significance of Charity (Dāna) According to Buddhist View

Nguyen Thi Chot
Ph. D. Research Scholar in Department of Buddhist Studies
University of Delhi, Delhi - 110009

Abstract: Buddhism, a religion was formed on the morale of compassion and wisdom. The compassion is to help the sentient beings escape from the suffering of the life and the wisdom is to help sentient beings attain the realm of liberation (nirvana). With that message of compassion, Buddhism get hold of so many theories, which philosophize the methodology for the same aim. One of most methodology is the charity, which is a very common practice today. The charity in the viewpoint of Buddhism plays a great important role. However it is very rare to explicit recognize. So, it is necessary to do a presentation approach to the significance of charity. Accordingly, these aspects which are relevance to the charity as its kinds, categories and requitals will be deal with.

1. Introduction
The Buddha spent unnumbered lifetimes practicing Bodhisattva-path, saving sentient beings out of his great compassion. In this process he particularly practiced charity. Charity is the solid foundation which led him to enlightenment. A wise man practices charity for two reasons: to tame his mind and to destroy anger. For these reasons, a Tathāgata is called Unsurpassed Honored One.

Charity, the Sanskrit of "Dāna", means giving away, offering, gift or sacrifices for the welfare of other sentient beings. It can be explained literally as giving the necessities (as robe, alms food, lodgings, medicines etc.) to all sentient beings without discrimination (on the basis of good or bad).1

The method of practicing charity is explained in Majjhima Nikaya. When a person gives anything to others, at first he must have a feeling that he wants to do that, and secondly, his donation should not bring the affliction to them. His donation should be made not out of fear or disrespect, but because of his love and compassion.

The charity (dāna) has an important place in both the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna. According to the Mahāvyutpatti, the charity is:

- The first of four things which generate merit (puyakriyā-vasūṭūṇī)
- The first of four things which tend towards popularity (sagara-vasūṭūṇī).

2. The Kinds of Charity
In Buddhist literature, the practice of charity is considered essential. In the Dharmasagāra, the charity is said to be of three kinds:

- The charity of worldly things.
- The charity of Dharma-truth.
- The charity of fearlessness.

2.1. The Charity of Worldly Things
In the Sūtra of the Upāsaka Precepts, the charity of worldly things is ascribed as:

"The giving of wealth means to give away one’s wealth freely and without consideration of its value or quantity. Things such as cattle, sheep, elephants, horses, houses, bedding, trees, wells, slaves, servants, buffaloes, donkeys, vehicles, utensils, vases, beds, furniture, copperware, ironware, earthenware, clothes, jewels, lamps, flowers, tents, hats, shoes, table, canes, ropes, plows, axes, grass, water, rocks, and so on are given, considered according to the supplicant’s needs. In addition to these, the building of temples or living quarters given to those who renounce the household life, excluding elephants and horses, is also the giving of wealth."5

Furthermore, the charity of worldly things implies of the following external and internal factors:

- The charity of external things means a person takes his frequently and highly valuable things as food, clothes, car, garden… gift to other ones. This is the method to rear the compassion which the Buddha taught to the Buddhists laity.
- The charity of internal things means a person is advised to begin to sacrifice all which he has for the well-being of others. The sacrifice involves the charity of his person, enjoyments and merit. This is a lofty behavior of sacrifice, very difficult to do, only appears in a person with great compassion and free from the constraints of self and mine.
2.2. The Charity of Dharma-truth

The charity of the Dharma-truth is an immaterial charity method. It means: “to teach others to take precepts, leave the home life, cultivate the way, consult the Sāgha about important matters, preach the proper Dharma to those with deviant views, distinguish between the true and the false, and proclaim the four errors and nonlaxity.” The material of this method is the almoner’s wisdom and his behavior. Therefore, the charity of the Dharma-truth has a high value compared with the charity of worldly things. While the charity of worldly things only helps sentient beings to be free from poverty and penury, the charity of the Dharma-truth has the ability to free sentient beings from mental suffering. In the Dharmapada, the Buddha said: “The gift of the Dhamma excels all gifts; the taste of the Dhamma excels all tastes; delight in the Dhamma excels all delights.”

If one advises others somethings as aspiring the faith, observing the precepts, practicing the giving, hearing the Dharma, and developing the wisdom, in innumerable future lives he will receive excellent requitals, such as:

- Beautiful countenance: sentient beings will uproot their anger after hearing the Dharma.
- Longevity: out of loving kindness sentient beings will quit killing after hearing the Dharma.
- Abundant wealth: sentient beings will not steal others’ wealth after hearing the Dharma.
- Physical strength: sentient beings will open their hearts and delight in charity after hearing the Dharma.
- Enjoy peace and joy in his body: sentient beings will not abandon self-restraint after hearing the Dharma.
- Acquire unimpeded eloquence: sentient beings will destroy the mind of delusion after hearing the Dharma.

2.3. The Charity of Fearlessness

In life one always experiences fear from in childhood until death: fear of cold, heat, scolding, beatings; fear of running short of food and clothing, unemployment; fear of sickness, decay, death etc. With the perfect wisdom and generous compassion, the Buddha introduced the charity of fearlessness. It means to make sentient beings feel safe. In the Sūtra of the Upāsaka Precepts, the Buddha says that: “If the bodhisattva sees sentient beings in fear of kings, lions, tigers, wolves, floods, fires, or robbers and saves them [from the fear], this is called the giving of fearlessness.” This has two aspects:

- In the negative aspect: making others feel fearless.
- In the positive aspect: giving others the gallantry and serenity to face the coming danger or tribulation.

In fact, because of the desire of life and fear of death, man is trapped in a prison of fearfulness. As Buddhists, let us clear away the fearing for ourselves and for others by the way of “charity of fearlessness” in order to face the problem of birth and death.

However, there are some things which one should not give or do to others: “…should not at any time impure things to the dead in order to please them; …never gives alcohol, poisons, swords, shades, and so on to people whether they have attained self-mastery or not; …does not give impure food or medicine to the sick nor does he steal as little as one penny so as to give.”

3. The Categories of Charity

There are four elements which define an action: the strength of intention (citta), the concentration (vīmaṇḍa), the energy (vīrya) and the investigation (vīmāṇḍa) involved in the action. These elements categorize the action of charity into three types: when these four constituent elements are weak, the charity is said to be of inferior level; when they are of medial standard, the charity is regarded as medium; when they are strong, the charity is considered to be of superior level. This means that when the action of charity is promoted by desire for fame, it is of inferior level; when the action of charity is promoted by desire for happiness, it is of medium level; when the action of charity is promoted by desire for being noble-hearted, it is of superior level.

Furthermore, the charity of worldly things is inferior, and the charity of Dharma-truth is superior, for the dharma helps the recipient in this and all their future lives. One can give the charity of Dharma-truth in many ways. One can formally teach the dharma as the monks did by preaching or lecturing to people. One can also informally teach the dharma in normal casual conversation as one's every utterance is virtuous in content and in the style of delivery. The charity of Dharma-truth can take the form of good advice to a friend or words of wisdom to a child. Moreover, the charity of Dharma-truth includes not only promulgation of the truth but also the dual function of refuting false teachings as well. So if one knows false teachings are being spread or that a person believes in false teachings, one must also actively dispel them. The charity of Dharma-truth includes spreading the truth and stopping the false teachings. Also, if one sees a person engaging in unwholesome thoughts, words, or actions, one must give the charity of Dharma-truth and attempt to guide the person back onto the path of wholesomeness. One gives the dharma in a positive
way as an act of commission when one spreads the teachings. One also gives the charity of Dharma-truth by non-omission of the dharma in that one never fails to speak up if one sees false teachings or unwholesomeness. Every interaction with others and also with oneself strives to further the spiritual development of the individual. The all-powerful charity of Dharma-truth helps others develop the ability to self liberation.

In the Dakkhi avibha gasutta, the Buddha taught Ananda that there were fourteen objects of charity: 12

1) Buddha;
2) Pacceka buddha (one enlightened for and by himself alone);
3) Arahattaphala (who has attained arahatship);
4) Arahattamagga (who is on the path of arahatship);
5) Anāgāmiphala (non-returner);
6) Anāgāminmagga (who is on the path of non-return);
7) Sakradāgāmiphala (one returner);
8) Sakradāgāminmagga (who is on the path of the once returning state);
9) Sotāpattiphala (stream-attainer);
10) Sotāpatti magga (who is on the path of stream-attainment);
11) One who is beyond and without attachment to sense-pleasures;
12) An ordinary person of moral habit;
13) An ordinary person of poor moral habit;
14) An animal.

Thereon, one make a charity to these fourteen objects above, he will get the unmeasured merit.

4. The Requitals of Charity

If a wealthy dignitary gives to the following eleven kinds of people, it is called inconceivable charity: evil ones, precept violators, foes, fakers, nonbelievers in causality, coercive solicitors, harsh scolders, the angry, the ungrateful, the powerful, and the wealthy. 13

The requitals to the almsgiver will be 100 times his alms given to animals; 1,000 times the alms given to those who have violated the precepts; 100,000 times the alms given to who observe the precepts; 1,000,000 times the alms given to non-Buddhists who have ended their desires; 1,000 ko (one hundred million) times the alms given to those who are nearly Srotāpantas; 14 immesurably for alms given to Srotāpantas, those who are nearly Sakdāgāmins, 15 up to the Buddhas. 16

However, there are eight reasons which will fail to bear the unsurpassed fruit for almsgiver. These are: 17

- After charity, one joyfully praises oneself.
- Before charity, one says that one has nothing to give.
- After charity, one scolds the recipient with a vicious mouth.
- After charity, one asks the recipient to pay double the value of the alms.
- After charity, one harbors doubts.

The complier of the Mahāyāna śraddhotpadāsāstra believes that it is imperative for all people to awaken the Mahāyāna faith in the practice of complete charity: “when they are performing those three acts of charity, let them not cherish any desire for fame or advantages, nor covet any worldly rewards. Only thinking of those benefits and blessings that are at once for themselves and others, let them aspire to the most excellent, most perfect knowledge (anuttara-samyaksambodhi).” 18 This is also taught by the Buddha in the Majjhima Nikāya: “Whoever, without attachment, gives to those without attachment

A gift rightfully acquired, the mind well pleased

Firmly believing in the rich fruit of karma
I assert this gift to be a gift abundant in gain.” 19

Both the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna traditions give prominence to the role of and importance to charity. Its full meaning is profit for oneself and others. One’s charity brings solace and benefit to living beings in the present and future. The giving which comes from compassion is the performance of the vow of saving mankind and protecting the world of the Buddhas. From the beginning when the monastic community was just established, the Buddha taught his ordained disciples as follows: “Fare ye, bhikkhus, in a round that may be for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for love toward the world, for the advantage, the good, the happiness of gods and men.” 20 This is considered as a message of compassion, saving mankind and protecting the world. Not only in the Buddha’s time but today also, the monks and laypeople who follow the Buddha always remember that message. Those who admire the Buddha and his teachings, want to enter the clear light of liberation, should follow that message.

As far as self-profit is concerned, the A guttara-Nikāya recorded the following teaching: “The alms-giver, when come to deva-state or man, surpasses the non-giver in five ways: in divine lifespan, beauty, happiness, honour and power.” 21 Another source mentions: “One who gives a gift but is no self-seeker, not wrapt up the result, seeking no reward, nor thinks to enjoy the fruit hereafter; yet gives thinking: ‘It’s good to give!...’, thereafter, on the breaking up of the body after death, arises in the company of the devas of...
Mahayana considers charity as one of six basic things necessary for those who practice the Bodhisattva-path, the danaparamita. The Vajracchedikā-prajñā-paramitā-sūtra says: “If bodhisattvas practice charity without attachment, their merits are immeasurable.” Charity without attachment according to this sūtra means practicing charity without attachment to form, sound, smell, taste, touch or dharmas. The Sutra of Forty Two Sections says: “When you see someone who is practicing giving, aid him joyfully, and you will obtain vast and great blessing.” Here, the Buddha teaches not only develop happiness witnessing others’ charity but to be a part of this act of charity.

5. Conclusion

From the dissection above, the charity bears a significant meaning in Buddhist view. Through the practice of charity, one will renounce many things. One develops a giving attitude as one learns to give openly and freely, decreasing one’s sense of ownership and possessiveness and thereby greed and the notion of self. Through charity, one learns to not be attached to anything to not cling. Charity cultivates an open-hearted sensitive attitude towards others as one mentally dedicates all one’s possessions to others.

For the practice of charity to truly be perfection, it must be infused with wisdom. As one gives with wisdom, the practice of charity helps one to gradually forget “the selfish self”. When Subhuti asked the Buddha “What is a Bodhisattva’s Perfection of Giving?” The Buddha replied “…there is nowhere an apprehension of anything.” When the Buddha was asked how the Perfection of Giving is fulfilled by a Bodhisattva, the Buddha replied “…The perfection of giving is fulfilled when gift, giver and receiver are not taken as a basis.” There is no apprehension of self, recipient or gift. So, it is important to note that while the perfection of charity is based on a foundation of wisdom. It helps one realizes that there is no self for which one needs to be selfish and the “Selfish Self” ceases to exist.

1 Vin.III.133.
2 Title of the dictionary The Great Volume of Precise Understanding or Essential Etymology, composed in Tibet around the late 8th to early 9th centuries C.E.
3 Title of the collection of Buddhist Technical Terms composed by Nāgārjuna.
4 T. 24, No. 1488. It was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese under the Northern Liang Dynasty by the Tripitaka Master Dharmakṣema from India.
7 Dh. 354.
12 M.III. 254-5.
14 One who is free from the first three fetters of individualistic views, of doubt, and of clinging to rites and rules, but has not yet freed oneself of passions. He must be reborn at least seven times in order to attain liberation; however, his rebirths will be only in one of the higher modes of existence. However, if he tries to overcome the inclination toward sensual pleasure and aggression, he only has to be reborn two or three times.
15 He is called “Once-returner”, the second stage of sainthood.
16 M. III. 255.
19 M. III. 257.
20 S.I.105.
21 A.III.33.
22 A.IV.61-3.
Abbreviation and Bibliography

Primary Sources

Vin. The Vinaya Pitaka

Dh. The Dhammapada

M. The Majjhima Nikāya

S. The Saṃyutta Nikāya

A. The Aṭṭhagutta Nikāya

T. The Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō
The Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, T. 08, No. 0235

The Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, T. 17, No. 0784

The Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, T. 24, No. 1488

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