

“Dana, Sila, Bhavana - The Gradual Way.”



Dana-Sila-Bhavana is the real treasure of humanity; the gradual path to freedom.

In the Udana (“inspired utterances”) collection of the Khuddaka Nikaya, one chapter is devoted to instructions for the lay followers of the Buddha. Rather than the intense practice of the monks, which may result in the explosion of sudden enlightenment, the Udana includes a method for the laity that leads to gradual awakening over a long period of time.

Just as the ocean has a gradual shelf, a gradual slope, a gradual inclination, with a sudden drop-off only after a long stretch, in the same way this Doctrine and Discipline (dhamma-vinaya) has a gradual training, a gradual performance, a gradual progression, with a penetration to freedom only after a long stretch.

— Udana 5.5 (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.5.05.than.html>)

Dana

The gradual training begins with the practice of generosity (*dana*), which starts the long process of weakening the unawakened practitioner's habitual tendencies to cling to views, to sensuality, and to unskillful modes of thought and behavior. This is followed by the development of virtue, the basic level of sense-restraint that helps the practitioner develop a healthy and trustworthy sense of self. The peace of mind born from this level of self-respect provides the foundation for all further progress along the path. Finally, the mind is trained to refine our intentions and our insights so that we instinctively choose the way toward freedom in every decision we make.

In the Dana Sutta, (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an07/an07.049.than.html>), the Buddha explains that it is not the gift itself which accumulates merit; it is the intention of the giver. A gift that is given with the intention of profiting the giver does not bear fruit. The same gift, if given by someone “who gives a gift not seeking his own profit, not with a mind attached [to the reward], not seeking to store up for himself, nor [with the thought], 'I'll enjoy this after death.'” -- and not seeking self-righteous pride in his own virtue, that gift bears great reward.

The benefit of *dana* depends on the heart with which you give. During the Buddha's time, there was one poor lady who stayed in a faraway place and had no chance to offer food to monks. Fortunately, one day Maha Kassapa passed by that area. When she saw him, she was very happy and offered rice to him. After she made the offering, she was very happy. This was the only one chance she had to offer food to the monk which she did with a pure mind. It is not the value of the gift that counts, but the heart that gives.

Dana provides a means to live our lives in a way that benefits others. Dana may be an intangible, such forgiveness or gratitude.

Consideration of the Recipient

Jim told us of a favorite uncle of his, who traveled the world when younger. After every trip abroad, this uncle would bring Jim coins from the lands he had visited. These coins were exotic compared to American coins, and were inscribed with strange writing and sometimes cast in strange shapes. Each visit by this uncle was an occasion to look forward to.

Years later, the uncle developed severe Alzheimer's, and ended up in a nursing home, unable to feed himself, walk, hold conversations or engage in any meaningful communication. On a visit, Jim remembered that the old man liked the ocean and sailing, and proposed taking his uncle down to a nearby dock in his wheelchair. Both the family and staff thought it would be inappropriate, and a meaningless gesture. This man had given Jim years of kindness and thoughtfulness, and deserved an opportunity to see the boats and ships again, even if he no longer cared or recognized them. Despite the discouragements, Jim unobtrusively and quietly left the nursing home with his uncle, taking him to a nearby dock, and positioned the wheelchair so his uncle could see the boats sailing in and out.

Although unable to speak, the uncle's eyes lit up, he began nodding his head, and pounded the arms of the wheelchair in delight.

Dana does not have to be a material gift – it may be a gesture of kindness, having value in the eyes of the recipient.

Consideration of the Gift

The gift that we offer must be pure. Gifts cannot be obtained from stealing, cheating, killing, or from causing suffering to others.

Practicing dana helps us loosen the bonds of clinging. We do not cling to the value of the gift, or the value of the reward of giving. The gift is but an ornament of the mind.

Sila (precept or discipline) is the fence against the encroachment of bad things which destroy our life and others' lives

In his book entitled "For a Future to be Possible", Thich Nhat Hanh describes in detail how the Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings (the Five Precepts) can be used by anyone in today's world to create a more harmonious and peaceful life.

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression, I vow to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well being of people, animals, plants and minerals. I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.

The Pali term for meditation is *bhavana*: development. It's a shorthand word for the development of skillful qualities in the mind. There are two methods of *bhavana*: *samatha* and *vipassana*. *Samatha-bhavana* is the development of tranquility, and *Vipassana-bhavana* is the development of insight.

Bhavana is about developing our human mind. One who practices *bhavana* will be wise, knows how to behave and how to respond to all situations. The Buddha said, "Bhavana is the fence of mind which protects us from wrong thinking, which is the cause of suffering."

An untrained mind is like a wild animal mind -- a person will not benefit from it. If a person wants to benefit from his mind, he must train his mind. **Bhavana also means to constantly remind the mind to observe itself without forming opinions.**

This is the way of training our mind, the way to purifying the mind, and thus the way to change a person. When we realize it and understand it, then we will know and see the world and ourselves as they really are. This practice is a fence to guard our mind. Our happiness or suffering is dependent on the mind. *Bhavana* is the way for protecting our mind.

Thanissaro Bhikku writes (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/agendas.html>) :

Satipatthana is often translated as "foundation of mindfulness," which gives the impression that it refers to an object of meditation. This impression is reinforced when you see the four satipatthanas listed as body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. But if you look at the texts, you find that they teach satipatthana as a process, a way of establishing (upatthana) mindfulness (sati): hence the compound term. When the texts define the compound, they give, not a list of objects, but four formulas describing an activity.

Here's the first formula:

A meditator remains focused on the body in and of itself — ardent, alert, and mindful — putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

Each of the terms in this formula is important. "Remaining focused" can also be translated as "keeping track." This refers to the element of concentration in the practice, as you hold to one particular theme or frame of reference amid the conflicting currents of experience. "Ardent" refers to the effort you put into the practice, trying to abandon unskillful states of mind and develop skillful ones in their stead, all the while trying to discern the difference between the two. "Alert" means being clearly aware of what's happening in the present. "Mindful" means being able to remember or recollect. Sometimes mindfulness is translated as non-reactive awareness, free from agendas, simply present with whatever arises, but the formula for satipatthana doesn't support that translation. Non-reactive awareness is actually part of equanimity, one of many qualities fostered in the course of satipatthana, but the ardency involved in satipatthana definitely has an agenda, a task to be done, while the role of mindfulness is to keep your task in mind.

The task here is twofold: staying focused on your frame of reference, and putting aside any greed and distress that would result from shifting your frame of reference back to the world. This is the meaning of "the body in and of itself." In other words, you try to stay with the experience of the body as it's immediately felt, without referring it to the narratives and views that make up your sense of the world. You stay away from stories of how you have related to your body in the past and how you hope to relate to it in the future. You drop any concern for how your body fits into the world in terms of its beauty, agility, or strength. You simply tune into the body on its own terms — the direct experience of its breathing, its movements, its postures, its elementary properties, and its inevitable decay. In this way you learn how to strip away your assumptions about what does or doesn't lie behind your experience of the body, and gain practice in referring everything to the experience itself.

That a process is gradual does not mean that it is easy or that the results are trivial. Percy Bysshe Shelley and Horace Smith, two 19th century English poets, challenged each other to write a poem about Ramesses the Great, Pharaoh of the nineteenth dynasty in Ancient Egypt. Shelley's, the better known of the two, was published on January 11, 1818 under title of *Ozymandias*, another name for Ramesses the Great. Smith's poem, originally titled with the same name, was published on February 1, 1818 with the revised title, *On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below*.

On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below

In Egypt's sandy silence, all alone,
Stands a gigantic Leg, which far off throws
The only shadow that the Desert knows.
"I am great Ozymandias," saith the stone,
"The King of kings: this mighty city shows
The wonders of my hand." The city's gone!
Naught but the leg remaining to disclose
The sight of that forgotten Babylon.
We wonder, and some hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when through the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the wolf in chase,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What wonderful, but unrecorded, race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.

Though gradual, time can grind down mountains and erase civilizations. Ozymandias reminds us of the truth of impermanence. Nor does gradual mean easy. One estimate for the time needed to

complete the gradual awakening process is to allow 10 years for the practice of dana to take effect, 10 years for sila, and 10 or more years for bhavana. The gradual awakening may complete towards the end of one's life (which may be when it is needed most).

Buddhism is not just asking us to believe the Teachings. What is good or bad is to be discovered by oneself. The Teachings of the Buddha in the Kalama Sutta state that:

"...Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture ; nor upon surmise ; nor upon an axiom ; nor upon specious reasoning ; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over ; nor upon another's seeming ability ; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher .' Kalamas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' abandon them."

- (Anguttara Nikaya 3.65,

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html>)

The Buddha implores us to exercise the freedom to think and see things clearly for ourselves. He even goes further, saying that we should not believe or accept his teaching blindly. But we should realize and discover by and for ourselves what is good and what is bad, as stated clearly in the Kalama Sutta. The fruit of practicing the Dhamma is that one can discover the Truth by oneself.

The importance of this is highlighted by the story of Angulimala, who went to study under a well-known Brahmin guru. At the school, he excelled in his studies and became the teachers' favorite student, enjoying special privileges in his teachers' house. However, the other students grew jealous of Angulimala's speedy progress and sought to turn his master against him. To that end, they made it seem as though Angulimala had seduced the master's wife and boasted that he was wiser than the guru. Unwilling or unable to attack Angulimala directly (one version of the story states that Angulimala was as "strong as seven elephants", while another states that the teacher worried that his business would suffer if he was found to have murdered a student), the teacher said that Angulimala's training was complete, but that he must provide the traditional final gift offered to a guru before the teacher would grant his approval. As his payment, the teacher demanded 1,000 fingers, each taken from a different victim, thinking that Angulimala would be killed in the course of seeking this grisly prize.

Through unquestioning obedience to the guru, Angulimala became a highwayman, killing travelers who passed through the forest. When the people of the kingdom began to avoid the roads, he entered the villages and dragged people from their homes. He never took clothes or jewels from his victims, only fingers. To keep count of the number of victims that he had taken, he strung them on a thread and hung them on a tree. However because birds began to eat the flesh from the fingers, he started to wear them around his neck as a garland.

The Buddha perceived with his "divine eye" that Angulimala had slain 999 victims, and was desperately seeking a thousandth. The Buddha set off to intercept Angulimala, despite being warned by the people of the village in which he was staying.

On the road through the forest of Kosala, Angulimala saw the Buddha and decided to make him the 1000th victim. He drew his sword, and started running towards the Buddha. But although Angulimala was running as fast as he could, he couldn't catch up with the Buddha who was walking calmly. Angulimala, though running with all his might, could not catch up with the Blessed One walking at normal pace. This bewildered Angulimala so much that he called to the Buddha to stop. The Buddha said that he himself had already stopped, and that it was Angulimala who should stop. Angulimala asked for further explanation, after which the Buddha said that he had stopped harming living beings, and that Angulimala was still harming and hurting living beings.

After hearing this, Angulimala changed his ways, vowed to cease his life as a brigand and joined the Buddhist order.

Unquestioning obedience to a teacher led Angulimala to a life filled with suffering, both for himself and those around him. This suffering was relieved by direct intervention of the Buddha, resulting in sudden awakening rather than the gradual one. Everyone involved was grateful that Angulimala fast-tracked his enlightenment, rather than take 30 years or so for the gradual approach... However, most of us are not in so desperate need of awakening.

Jack Kornfield says that to think that there are enlightened beings versus unenlightened is misleading. It is not that one is either completely enlightened, or not at all. Rather, there are only enlightened behaviors. The sudden, complete conversion to a fully enlightened being is rare (although in the case of Angulimala, one which we may be extremely grateful for). The gradual approach is better suited to modern life. Practice of enlightened behavior will lead to being enlightened. Follow the path of dana, sila, and bhavana to freedom.

As regards the mind and the manner of its arising, the Buddha stated in the Dhammapada (v 37):

*Faring far, wandering alone,
Formless and lying in a cave.
Those who do train the mind
Are sure released to lives of freedom.*

Free are those who control their minds.

Okay, now everybody practice!