

Dana or Offering

Extract taken from 'The Happy Twins: Dzogchen and Mahamudra'¹

Autumn Retreat in the Eifel, 2019

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Before we begin today's teaching I want to say a little bit about dana. As we are all aware, in the economic system that we live in a price can be put on anything and everything. Everything can be turned into a commodity to be traded, which means that the price, and with that the implicit value, gets established by some other system.

Here we want to have the sense, and it is an absolute truth, that there is no cost for dharma. Dharma should always be freely available. In the different places I go to, different organisations set up different systems. We try to arrange it so that you pay for your food and lodging, but the teaching is not charged.

The idea of dana is that if you want to offer something it goes into the system for maintaining what we do e.g. the website, supporting some of the book publications, sponsoring practitioners and so on. That is a gesture from you. The key point here is to find the difference between an exchange mechanism and a gift. When you give a gift, if it is a real gift, it has to be from you. It is not a trade. When you get into an exchange, as we have touched on before, you are trying to work out the parity. Dana is absolutely not a question of how much you give. It is just that if you want to, you can give something.

¹ Two texts were studied on this retreat. The Mirror of Luminous Revelation (from Nuden Dorje Drophan Lingpa) and The Mahamudra Middle Way of the Ganges (from Tilopa).

In previous years some people have put a leaf in an envelope, and that is also very nice. A leaf is very beautiful. It is about the gesture from you going out because what we are wanting to practise is gift giving. The idea of the nirmanakaya is that your embodiment is a gift into the world. Christians say that God gave his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, and that is the gift of God. All us- the other people are a bit of a problem. We are a kind of a mistake and Jesus is the gift.

This is not how it is from the dzogchen point of view. We are the gift or the showing, or the blossoming of the potential of the ground, so having that sense of gifting ourselves is very important. Being involved in dharma and thinking about organisations, structures and money gives us a chance to de-commodify.

We use this term 'reification': creating the sense of things existing as something out there. As soon as you have a thing it is in a world of other things and you move it around. Of course Buddhist centres like this need to make a profit to survive as they have lots of expenses. If they have a bad winter and the roof leaks, they need to be able to bring in builders to repair it.

Clearly, money is part of our world. The question is what is our relation with money, and what is the mood that we have around money? For me, the mood or feeling tone is a quality of participation. Some people have a lot of money and others have very little money. Money should never be a barrier between coming to dharma or not. I heard that somebody who often comes here didn't come this time because he didn't have enough money. This is disappointing. We should all try to find ways to support people to come if they really want to be here.

Everything in the world interacts. Personally, I believe that the arrival of money in the world is a form of blindness. If I have taken my three goats to the market and I want to get a cow, I don't want just any old cow. I want to find a really good cow and I know how to check out a cow by looking at its straight back, its udders, its teeth, its eyes... In English we say, 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth' because one way to test the age of the horse is by looking at its teeth. When you are in trade you are checking out all these things. On one level that means being mindful. You are actually having to think, *'Okay. These are my lovely goats. I have raised them since they were kids, and now I am going to exchange them. What for?'* It brings you back into phenomena.

Money is an abstract idea. The euro kind of floats free especially now that it is used in different countries with different economies; it sucks everything into this stratosphere and takes us away from the actual value of things. I remember being in Greece when the euro first came in and a coffee, which before had cost a few drachma, suddenly cost a euro. So many prices went up with the introduction of the euro. Setting a price was difficult. That is the danger of abstraction. If we stay close to phenomena we get much more sense of living value and we know where we are. Is it worth it?

It is very important that dharma becomes something that we participate in, and something that we can see directly gives us value. It is not about believing in dharma as a dogma. It is not about putting ourselves into a sect or some kind of fantasy of a gilded future.

Each day of this retreat, moment-by-moment, you are here and you have come for something; to gain something and to open in some way. You have to review, is that working for you? If it is not working you can come and talk with me and we will see if there is something that gets in the way. Maybe this is not for you. You might think, *'Oh, but people say James is a very good teacher.'* but if it is not for you, it is not for you.

Cinderella went to the ball and left in a rush. She left her shoe behind. The prince came round with a shoe and many people thought, *'I'm sure my foot should go in that shoe.'* In the fairytale the two stepsisters are pushing each other and one of them even takes a knife to cut her toes off to force her foot into the shoe. But if it's not her shoe, it is not her shoe. That is the important thing — to live in your own skin and participate and see if this fits right for you.

Maybe we can make some adjustments to the retreat and the teachings. Because if it is not alive in you, if it is not nourishing and helping your life to function so that you find more relaxation, more freedom, more connectivity and less anxiety and self-preoccupation, then it is not doing the business. The key thing is for us to come closer to phenomena and not go into abstractions.