



29. SISTER CHAP CHAN

Sister Phap Chan first experienced the wisdom teachings of Asia through the practice of Tae Kwan Do as a teenager. From there, she moved to the practice of hatha yoga, which led naturally to the practice of meditation. She turned to Buddhism in 2001 and began formal practice at a Zen center.

After moving to Connecticut, Sister Phap Chan began practicing in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition. Her teacher, Ven. Thich Tri Hoang, ordained her as a lay Dharma teacher in April 2011. Two weeks later, he ordained her as a novice monastic.

From her earliest meditation experience, Sister Phap Chan gravitated to the practice of samatha. She first began practicing with Tina Rasmusin and Stephen Synder in 2008, and has completed many retreats as well as the year-long Awakening Dharma mentoring program with them. In 2012, Sister Phap Chan piloted the Awakening Dharma Samatha Practice Group Program in her local area.

Sister Phap Chan offers meditation instruction in Buddhist and non-Buddhist venues, participates in meditation groups at two local temples (one Mahayana and one Theravada), and offers the medicine of the Dharma to anyone in need of relief from suffering. She enjoys the natural world, children, and animals—all vital components of her spiritual life.

INTERVIEW

Q: What are your views on dana and charging for the teachings?

Sister Chap Chan: You will already have a solid doctrinal and philosophical perspective on dana, and its fraternal twin, caga, from others and from your own research and reading. I'm looking forward to learning more about what I will refer to as "generosity" from your book, because I know you will have investigated it from the perspective of many traditions. My reflections will be based on my experience, and I will not try to offer a coherent perspective—from any tradition—on generosity.

My understanding of generosity comes from several sources: my Christian upbringing in the Protestant Lutheran church, my family, my professional work, and 12 years of immersion in the Buddhist tradition.

In my religious education as a child, my parents gave me money specifically to offer at church each Sunday. I would put my own money in the plate that was passed up and down each pew as part of the weekly religious service. I can recall (or I believe I can recall) a feeling of independence and pride and happiness as my little hand placed the money

in the plate. I am sure that the adult who passed the offering plate smiled at me. The impulse to give was positively reinforced in that way.

At home, I was not coached in charity, rather the emphasis was always on sharing. I imagine that, because I am an only child, my parents were especially concerned that I not become (or be perceived by others as being) selfish. I knew my mother did charitable work as a volunteer, and I knew my parents gave money each week at church. Beyond that, I was not aware of their charity. It was not discussed. They did, however, encourage me to volunteer and to do service work, and I did that from the time I was probably 11 or 12 years old. I recall one summer working in a summer program for African-American children in Charleston, SC, where I spent my adolescence. I believe that this encouragement to work in underserved communities was probably a conscious move on my parents' part to reinforce religious and family values.

I gradually left the Lutheran church as I gradually left home. After graduating from college, I found myself working in nonprofit organizations. In the U.S., this inevitably involves fundraising. One cannot work in an American nonprofit without being keenly aware of one's dependence on others' generosity. My writing ability led me to be guided to professional work in fundraising, which I did for many years and for several different types of nonprofits (cultural, scientific, and arts), both as an employee and as a consultant. In this work, I realized that the impulse to generosity was based on several factors (here I mean the generosity of individuals, not institutional generosity, which is quite different). A donor needed to feel some kind of personal connection to the organization. There needed to be some level of trust that the organization was legitimate and worthy. The donor expected recognition for his or her generosity and anticipated some accounting from the organization to confirm that it had been a good steward of the gift. Most donors—I would say at least 95 percent of them—also expected a tax receipt, whether or not they asked for one, so clearly

the tax benefits of giving to a nonprofit also factored into the impulse to generosity.

Moving into the Buddhist tradition immersed me in a very different way of practicing and understanding generosity. When I first began Buddhist practice, I attended a Zen center in the Sambokkyodan tradition, a kind of Japanese-American amalgam. In the reception area of the center, there were envelopes and a box. One could put money (cash or a check) in the envelope and place it in the box. I recall (correctly or not) that there was a line on the envelope where one could write one's name...or not, as one chose. There was one seasonal ceremony (I can't recall the name) during which I learned it was traditional to make an offering directly to the sensei or roshi. Having no idea what an appropriate amount was, I wrote a check for \$40 and sent it in the mail with a note to the sensei. After receiving it, he called to say thank you and so positively reinforced my action.

That was my introduction to Buddhist generosity.

Over time, I came to understand that generosity was a complex topic in the Buddhist community. My upbringing inculcated in me a sense that generosity was a source of happiness and, although expected, was a personal matter. My professional work introduced me to the worldview in which generosity was more of a transactional relationship. In my heart, the first type of generosity felt more pure, but my practical experience taught me that generosity also had a business aspect that, from the perspective of the recipient, could not be ignored.

“Generosity” has a many-faceted meaning in Buddhism, but the primary emphasis is on its import at the psychological level. In this way, it is the impulse to generosity that is seen as meaningful and momentous. How one gives, how much one gives, are irrelevant; however, from a doctrinal

perspective, I came to learn, to whom one gives is important if one is concerned about merit and karmic results.

So here was a dilemma. I wanted to give, but how and to whom? It felt embarrassing to give to my teacher. I felt it cheapened the relationship in some way. In the beginning, I wrote checks to him, but later, I gave cash and made sure that it was given anonymously, either as part of a group offering or simply placed in an envelope with his name on it. My recollection is that I actually gave more when I gave anonymously.

When I made an offering to the temple or monastery, I usually wrote a check, and, consistent with American practice, I received a receipt for my gift.

I continued to practice this form of generosity on certain occasions. I learned that retreats were offered on two different terms. Those retreats that were offered at or by traditional monasteries and retreat centers were offered on a “dana” basis. This meant that one paid (and here I do mean “paid,” for I had received services in the form of lodging and food) what one could. At the end of the retreat, one had an opportunity to make an offering to the teacher, which I saw as a form of gratitude. In other retreat centers, primarily ones not associated with a monastery, participants paid a set amount. And, as at the “dana” retreats, one offered money to the teacher at the end of the retreat, either anonymously or not.

My friends and I sometimes discussed the question of “dana.” Was it better and purer to have retreats on an offering-only basis or was it better to have an upfront fee established? Of course the answer depended on one’s perspective!

Here is what my years of experience with generosity in the Buddhist tradition boil down to: in monasteries, temples, and retreat centers that are primarily run for and by immigrant Asians, the purer form of generosity prevails; in retreat centers run by and for Westerners, the fee-based system prevails. In both traditions, however, the offering to the teacher is seen as an expression of gratitude from the student to the teacher...at least on the surface.

I came to recognize that, in reality, many Dharma teachers rely on these offerings to support themselves. In fact, then, my generosity as a student came to be predicated on this understanding. If the teacher was a layperson or ordained in a tradition that permitted marriage, I felt that whatever I offered at the end of the retreat was really supporting his or her family. If the teacher was a monastic, several scenarios were possible. One scenario was that the monastic lived at a monastery that, in turn, depended on generosity for its existence. In that case, I thought my generosity was being transmitted through the teacher to a monastery or temple. Another scenario, I came to learn, was that many monastics in the U.S. are either self-supporting or are in charge of small temples or monasteries where he or she may be the only resident monastic or one of only two or three. In these cases, there is a symbiotic relationship between the temple or monastery and the monastic. The money that the monastic receives from teaching may be funneled back to the monastery or temple, which in turn feeds and lodges the monastic. Often in these cases, it is difficult to distinguish between the temple or monastery and the monastic.

I also learned that many immigrant Asian monastics, in both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions, are supporting families in their countries of origin, regularly sending money back to parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, and, in some cases, their own spouses and children. (It is a reality that monastics, even those who have taken traditional bhikkhu/bhikkhuni vows, are not celibate and may have legal or common-law spouses and children, or they may have spouses and children whom they have left in order to

ordain but still feel some obligation to support financially.) This understanding, too, factored into my decisions regarding generosity.

After practicing Buddhism for 7 or 8 years, I received transmission to teach as a layperson from my monastic Dharma teacher. I subsequently received ordination as a novice monastic in the Vietnamese Mahayana tradition from the same teacher.

My experience in the larger Buddhist community has been fairly diverse. I have practiced at traditional Asian temples and monasteries in the U.S. (Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, Chinese). I have sat retreats at large American Buddhist retreat centers. I have sat retreats offered by independent Western lay Dharma teachers who were not affiliated with a center, temple, or monastery. I have led, as a layperson and as a monastic, sanghas of Western lay practitioners. I have given Dharma teachings and participated in ceremonies as a monastic at immigrant Asian temples and monasteries. I have offered days of mindfulness as a monastic and given Dharma talks as a layperson and a monastic. All of these teaching/guiding activities involved generosity.

Because I have been an independent monastic, not living at a temple or monastery, I am sure people have thought they were supporting my existence through their generosity. I have not made any pretense, however, that this was the case. I have independent support from family that allows me to live on my own. I do not need to rely on offerings from others.

In short, here is how my practice of generosity has evolved, as a giver and as a receiver

When I give, I give from the heart, but I also give with practical awareness. If I know that a Dharma teacher is largely reliant on offerings, I give more. If

I know that a monastic Dharma teacher is supporting his or her own monastery or temple, I give with that in mind. If I know that a Dharma teacher is not reliant on offerings, I give more to the host organization and less to the teacher. When I teach, I never speak about generosity in a way that relates to me as an individual. I will place an offering bowl in some conspicuous place with a sign that indicates that all money will be offered to the site or organization that is hosting the teaching. Sometimes, people will give to me directly anyway. I do not refuse those offerings, as in the Buddhist tradition there is understood to be merit that accumulates to the donor and I would see it as disrespectful to the donor to refuse to accept the offering. The monies I do receive, I pass on, either to the hosting organization, to co-teachers, to temples with which I am (formally or informally) affiliated, to individuals I know are in need, or to charities. On occasion, I have also used such gifts to purchase materials that were needed for various teaching endeavors, such as teaching an ongoing class for children at a temple. This is my personal practice, and I am able to do this because I do not rely on offerings to support my existence.

I know lay Dharma teachers who are just beginning to offer teachings. Clearly, they are not famous, but they are loved and respected within their own small communities. Some of these teachers are not well-off financially. They have given up more lucrative careers in order to have more time to practice or to work in jobs that are more in keeping with the Buddhist precepts. I have, from time to time, acted as an agent to encourage others to support these individuals. I have spoken or written words to encourage others to make offerings to these individuals. To be honest, I have not always been comfortable doing this, but I have tried to place others' needs above my own feelings of discomfort.

There are no hard-and-fast rules about money in the Buddhist tradition, despite what some teachers say. Some teachers take a hard line on the precepts, following them to a T, but in reality, this is almost impossible in the West. I know that some Western Buddhist monks who are only one or two generations removed from Asia have found ways to keep the precepts

strictly and still survive, so it is possible. I doubt, though, that the monastic tradition can survive in the U.S. if that is expected or demanded of all Buddhist monastics. Even the most outwardly virtuous Asian monks I know, men who have been in the monastic life since they were 10 or 11 years old, whose conduct is so graceful and humane and loving and light that it almost literally floods me with well-being, are not able to avoid accepting money once they come to the U.S.—any more than they are able to avoid preparing and storing their own food or driving a car.

What we, as Buddhist monastics and laypeople, learn about generosity generally is learned at the feet of our teachers. As a tradition, Buddhism is passed from teacher to student. Usually, this means a monastic teacher, but more and more often these days, the teacher is a layperson. My experience is that we learn more from the behavior of our teacher than we do from his or her words. There are rules and there are guidelines. There is doctrine. There is teaching. There is practice. There is the ideal. There is the reality. Within all this, we navigate for ourselves.

There is a small incident that happened a couple of years ago, which was a powerful teaching for me about the practice of generosity. In the Vietnamese community, Tet (or Chinese new year) is the most popular holiday. Vietnamese temples offer Tet celebrations, even though Tet is a cultural holiday, not a Buddhist one. It is traditional to put money in red envelopes, which one gives to family (particularly children). At the temple, laypeople offer red envelopes to the monastics, and the temples offer red envelopes to the laypeople. It's a sweet exchange of generosity.

One year, when Tet came around, I was temporarily short of cash. I borrowed \$20 from an envelope I had that contained money offered by a weekly sangha to the hosting temple. I put the \$20 bill in a red envelope and offered it to the nun at the temple. She, in turn, offered me a red envelope. In that red envelope was a \$20 bill. I took the \$20 bill and placed it back in the envelope from which I had originally borrowed \$20. I smiled.

It was such a vivid and undeniable teaching on the dynamic nature of money. The nature of money is to flow.

A monastic friend once said to me that it isn't good to hold on to money for too long. It is better to keep it flowing and moving. My experience with the red envelopes during that Tet season was a hands-on affirmation of the truth of his words.

I have another way of thinking of money, too, that has proven helpful. I think of money as buttons. We all need buttons. We need buttons to keep our clothing on our bodies, to keep our coats closed in winter. They are pretty important in our day-to-day existence, yet no one gets possessive about buttons. No one gets greedy about buttons (at least no one I know!). No one hoards buttons. I think of money like buttons. It is needed in order to create certain acceptable conditions for our existence—sufficient food, proper shelter, necessary medicine, fuel, and clothing. If I have enough to take care of those needs, I don't hoard any money that is left over. I pass it along to others or I use it for non-vital needs...perhaps a new orchid or a new piece of technology. In other words, I keep it circulating. If we think of money in this way, as an ever-flowing stream, we can operate more in the realm of the dana paramita as it is conceived in the Mahayana tradition...no giver, no offering, no receiver. We wouldn't hesitate to give an extra button to someone who had lost one. In the same spirit of practicality and non-attachment, we can offer what we are able to whoever is in need or to those who have supported our spiritual progress.

END OF INTERVIEW