



35. RICHARD SHANKMAN

Richard Shankman lives in Oakland, CA. He has been a meditator since 1970 and teaches at dharma centers and groups nationally and internationally. Richard is co-founder of the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies and of Mindful Schools. He has sat many silent, intensive meditation retreats for periods up to eleven months long.

Richard began meditation practice in a Hindu oriented yoga tradition, and spent several years living in an ashram engaged in concentration-based meditation practices. He transitioned to Buddhist practice in the mid 1970's and has been a vipassana meditator ever since.

Richard has been active in bringing dharma and meditation practice into prisons, jails and drug rehabilitation programs in California. In the 1970's he

taught meditation in San Quentin State Prison, the Marin County jail and a San Francisco drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. Although no longer actively teaching in the prisons, programs that he started are continuing in both the Salinas Valley State Prison and the Men's Correctional Training Facility, both near Soledad, California.

Richard is the author of "The Experience of Samadhi: An In-Depth Investigation of Buddhist Meditation."

Richard holds a BS degree in Electrical Engineering and an MA degree in Philosophy and Religion, with an emphasis in Buddhist Studies.

www.richardshankman.org

INTERVIEW

Q: Can you please tell me what dāna means in the Theravada Buddhist tradition?

Richard Shankman: Dāna means giving, offering, or alms. It traditionally meant giving of any of the four requisites to the monastic order. More generally, dāna refers to giving without expecting any form of repayment from the recipient. Though the term has traditionally meant giving, it is also sometimes translated as 'generosity'. This is probably because giving must come from a generous attitude to be dāna.

Q: So how does this dana apply outside the monastery. With a lay Theravada teacher for example? Does this work the same way?

Richard Shankman: Outside the monastic setting there are no rules, so people, of course, are free to do whatever they wish. Most teachers and groups that I know of are trying to retain the spirit of dana, the best they can, within the context of living a lay life, not being supported by the laity as the monastics are. There is a wide range of what people and groups are doing.

In our organization, as with many others, everything is offered freely. People are educated on how we operate and that we depend solely on financial contributions in order to function. Participants then contribute or not, as they choose. Other organizations - I'm thinking of some of the larger ones with a number of paid staff positions - charge fees to participate in activities, though even in these cases they generally do not pay the teachers, whose incomes, then, depend on dana.

Similar to the variety of how organizations work in relation to dana, there is a range of how teachers operate. I do everything on a dana basis, meaning I offer everything freely and students who wish can offer dana to me in return. In this way, my entire income is dana based. Other teachers charge fees for their services.

The whole financial system is evolving as teachers and groups try to figure out how to be financially viable and retain the spirit of dana, freely giving, as much as possible.

Q: I understand on how your organization does this but when you say that there are no rules outside the monastery. Did not Buddha set up a system of rules for his teachings? How they should be given?

Do you know if in any scripture, he said its ok for lay people to teach the Dharma and accept dana?

Richard Shankman: I am not aware of any place in the Pali suttas that address the issue of lay people teaching. The sangha at the time of the Buddha was heavily monastic oriented. There are records of lay people becoming arahants, but nothing about them teaching, one way or another. The Pali sutta offer no guidance that I am aware of that apply to this question in modern times and cultures.

Q: What if a lay teacher gahapati/house holder who has a full time job, already has their clothing, shelter, food and medicinal needs met and are living a relatively luxurious life style. Should they even ask for dana? Are they even dana worthy if they are not a monk?

Richard Shankman: They are to be measure by the quality of the hearts, minds, thoughts, words and deeds, just as we should judge monastics. Bhikku Bodhi has publicly stated that there are many lay practitioners who are more spiritually advanced than many monks. People like Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, and others, were authorized, given direct "transmission", to teach by the great Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw. There plenty of other cases of lay people being

authorized by other recognized teachers in various traditions to teach and carry on a tradition.

Q: Why should they have any credibility at all if they can't even take all the precepts and live the celibate life of a monk? What kind of example are they setting or teaching by? How are they to be measured?

Richard Shankman: The example they are setting is that lay people can apply the dharma in the contexts of their lives, rather than in the traditional Asian model in which lay people do not practice, but make offerings to support the monastic sangha and acquire merit, in the hope of attaining enough merit to become monks in a future life.

Q: When you say, "The whole financial system is evolving as teachers and groups try to figure out how to be financially viable and retain the spirit of dana, freely giving, as much as possible."

Why is anything evolving? What's wrong with the old tradition of monasticism. What are the reasons to even create a new system of lay teachers or interfere with this 2.500 year old system?

Richard Shankman: I'm not saying there is anything wrong with the tradition. No one is interfering with the tradition. It is carrying on as it always has. That is a great fit for some. But many people find that the monastic forms are not the best to support their spiritual progress. Many people who had been in robes for years came to feel that the monastic form no longer served them well, while others remain as monks or nuns. There is no "one-size-fits-all" best form.

While I have great respect for some of the monastics who have attained great depths of realization and liberation, I also have tremendous respect for people who are sincerely striving to actualize dharma in their lives in the midst of families, jobs, etc.

END OF INTERVIEW