

# Buddha: An Economy of Gifts

According to the Buddhist rules for monastics, monks and nuns are not allowed to accept money or even to engage in barter or trade with lay people. They live entirely in an economy of gifts. Lay supporters provide gifts of material requisites for the monastics, while the monastics provide their supporters with the gift of the teaching.

Ideally--and to a great extent in actual practice--this is an exchange that comes from the heart, something totally voluntary. There are many stories in the [original Buddhist] texts that emphasize the point that returns in this economy depend not on the material value of the object given, but on the purity of heart of the donor and recipient. You give what is appropriate to the occasion and to your means, when and wherever your heart feels inspired.

For the monastics, this means that you teach, out of compassion, what should be taught, regardless of whether it will sell. For the laity, this means that you give what you have to spare and feel inclined to share. There is no price for the teachings, nor even a "suggested donation." Anyone who regards the act of teaching or the act of giving as payment for a particular favor is ridiculed as mercenary. Instead, you give because giving is good for the heart and because the survival of the Dhamma [dharma] as a living principle depends on daily acts of generosity.

The primary symbol of this economy is the alms bowl. If you are a monastic, it represents your dependence on others, your need to accept generosity no matter what form it takes. You may not get what you want in the bowl, but you realize that you always get what you need, even if it's a hard-earned lesson in doing without.

For monks, the bowl also represents the opportunity you give others to practice the Dhamma in accordance with their means. In Thailand, this is reflected in one of the idioms used to describe going for alms: *proad sat* or "doing a favor for living beings." There were times on my alms round in rural Thailand when, as I walked past a tiny grass shack, someone would come running out to put rice in my bowl.

Years earlier, before I was ordained, my reaction on seeing such a bare dwelling would have been to want to give monetary help to them. But now I was on the receiving end of their generosity. In my new position I may have been doing less for them in material terms than I could have as a lay person, but at least I was giving them the opportunity to have the dignity that comes with being a donor.

For the donors, the monk's alms bowl becomes a symbol of the good they have done. On several occasions in Thailand, people would tell me that they had dreamed of a monk



standing before them, opening the lid to his bowl. The details would differ as to what the dreamer saw in the bowl, but in each case the interpretation of the dream was the same: the dreamer's merit was about to bear fruit in an especially positive way.

The alms round itself is also a gift that goes both ways. On the one hand, daily contact with lay donors reminds the monastics that their practice is not just an individual matter, but a concern of the entire community. They are indebted to others for the right and opportunity to practice, and should do their best to practice diligently as a way of repaying that debt.

Moreover, the opportunity to walk through a village early in the morning, passing by the houses of the rich and poor, the happy and unhappy, gives plenty of opportunities to reflect on the human condition and the need to find a way out of the grinding cycle of death and rebirth. For the donors, the alms round is a reminder that the monetary economy is not the only way to happiness.

Above all, the economy of gifts symbolized by the alms bowl and the alms round allows for specialization, a division of labor, from which both sides benefit. Those who are willing can give up many of the privileges of home life and in return receive the free time, the basic support, and the communal training needed to devote themselves fully to Dhamma practice.

Those who stay at home can benefit from having full-time Dhamma practitioners around on a daily basis. The Buddha began the monastic order on the first day of his teaching career because he saw the benefits that come with specialization. Without it, the practice tends to become limited and diluted, negotiated into the demands of the monetary economy. The Dhamma becomes limited to what will sell and what will fit into a schedule dictated by the demands of family and job. In this sort of situation, everyone ends up poorer in things of the heart.

The fact that tangible goods run only one way in the economy of gifts means that the exchange is open to all sorts of abuses. This is why there are so many rules in the monastic code to keep monks from taking unfair advantage of the generosity of lay donors. There are rules against asking for donations in inappropriate circumstances, from making claims as to one's spiritual attainments, and even from covering up the good foods in one's bowl with rice, in hopes that donors will then feel inclined to provide something more substantial.

Periodically, throughout the history of Buddhism, the economy of gifts has broken down, usually when one side or the other gets fixated on the tangible side of the exchange and forgets the qualities of the heart that are its reason for being. Those who demand immediate return for specific services and goods will always require a monetary system.



Sincere Buddhist lay people, however, have the chance to play an amphibious role, engaging in the monetary economy in order to maintain their livelihood, and contributing to the economy of gifts whenever they feel so inclined. In this way they can maintain direct contact with teachers, ensuring the best possible instruction for their own practice, in an atmosphere where mutual compassion and concern are the medium of exchange, and purity of heart, the bottom line.

By Thanissaro Bhikku  
adapted from *Refuge: An Introduction to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha*

