

Burmese Buddhism and the Spirit Cult Revisited



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Rethinking *Daná* in Burma: The Art of Giving

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Previous anthropological literature construes *daná* (Pali *dāna*) in Burma rather narrowly, as giving to monks or to the Buddha. However, the detailed data I collected during fieldwork in Burma reveal that the Burmese understand *daná* more broadly, as 'giving' in which *saydana* (Pali *cetanā*) plays a key role.

The paper is a chapter of my PhD dissertation entitled "In the World of Rebirth: Politics, Economy and Society of Burmese Buddhists." By presenting ethnographic data that has not been offered in previous literature, I re-examine the Burmese concept and practice of *daná*. *Daná* is closely associated with Burmese notions of purity, detachment, and nobility, as well as merit. Its idea is deeply grounded in Burmese language and culture. Some forms of *daná* are not as conspicuous as giving to the monastic order. They are less identifiable by an outside observer, for they are not always revealed as *daná* because they occur in the everyday act of giving. Thus, such forms of *daná* have been largely neglected, or at least treated less seriously. I argue, however, that we cannot fully understand the idea of *daná* or the mindsets of the Burmese Buddhists without taking these forms of *daná* into account. A detailed observation of everyday discourse of *daná* reveals that *daná* permeates all kinds of daily transactions, shaping the practice of giving in Burmese society.

This understanding of *daná* may seem at odds with the traditional descriptions of *daná* in Burma or

in other Theravada Buddhist societies. However, I will show that the Burmese understanding of *daná* in fact resonates with the idea of *daná* we find in stories of giving in Buddhist cultures. The point of my argument is not to understate the significance of giving to monks or to the Buddha. My intention is to offer a description and analysis that takes into fuller account the subtleties of the practice and language of *daná*.

Chapter 4

Rethinking *Daná* in Burma: The Art of Giving

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss gift-giving (*daná*, Pali *dāna*) in the context of the theory of the gift presented by Mauss and developed by later anthropologists such as Appadurai (1986), Carrier (1995) and Gell (1986). *Daná* has not only religious but also social, economic and political aspects. In this chapter I focus on these aspects of *daná* by viewing it as a system of giving, exchange and consumption.

Previous literature (Nash 1965; Tambiah 1968; Spiro 1966; 1970[1982]; Strenski 1983; Schober 1996) tends to see merit-making as a transaction between layman and monk or the Buddha, the former being the gift-giver and the latter being the gift-taker. My data show that in Burma the transaction may be between layman, as well as from monk to layman, monk to monk, and human (layman and monk) to all other beings in the Burmese universe. These forms of *daná* are widely practised by the Burmese. This is how Daw Yi Yi Khaing, my friend in Yangon, explained *daná*. Being a university graduate and formerly a civil servant, she was able to explain it in succinct terms:

'*Daná* is to give away (*hlu-dan*) or to donate. It is to give (*páykan*), to give away (*hlu-dan*), to give away in charity (*sunkye*)^[1]. (Does it include giving to men (*lu*)?)^[2] Whether to human beings, to *nats*,^[3] to animals, to monks, or to female renunciators (*methilashin*), to whomever you give, it is *daná*. () Giving to elders, to friends of your age, to younger people can all be *daná*. To build a pagoda, to build a monastery, is *daná*. To sink a well or to dig a reservoir is equivalent to donating water and is therefore *daná*.'

This understanding of *daná* resonates with the idea of *daná* we find in stories of giving in Theravada Buddhism. Egge explains that '[i]n a number of *Játaka* stories, donors such as Dhanañjaya, Sivi, and Vessantara give to all who ask without regard for their personal qualities. These givers are celebrated not for the worthiness of their recipients, but solely for the greatness of their generosity.' According to this ideology of giving, the donors are praised because they give what is difficult to give, and do what is difficult to do (Egge 2002:34-35). The fact that giving to laymen has been denied or unfairly neglected in previous literature is problematic, as it obscures the complicated discourse of gift-giving in Burma: the art of giving in which merit-making is skilfully practised in various social relations. In Burma *daná* is practised in a much wider context in a more complex way. It is not merely for its religious importance but also for its social, economic and political importance that *daná* is practised so widely in Burma.

The worldly aspect of merit-making has been pointed out in previous literature. Tambiah's work on Buddhism in Thailand shows that merit-making has a social and worldly aspect rather than simply an otherworldly orientation, such as a good rebirth and better life (Tambiah 1968). By examining the villagers' concepts of merit-making, he described how these notions actually worked in their social context. Nash and Spiro likewise both state that *daná* is important to display of power and prestige (Nash 1965:124-125; Spiro 1970[1982]: 455-456). However, their focus was limited because they concentrated mainly on transactions between laymen and monks.

This led Tambiah to conclude that there are significant dichotomies in Thai social life between gift-giving and asceticism, between householder and monk and between secular and sacred activities. I wish to question the validity of these dichotomies. My argument is that the relation between these sets of seemingly analogous oppositions is not clear-cut, and that Tambiah's analysis obscures the intricacies of everyday discourse and practice. Here I interpret *daná* as a lay form of asceticism.^[4] I argue that giving (i.e. giving up of one's possessions) can be seen as a lay form of renunciation, in other words, a form of renunciation and asceticism for those who cannot fully renounce this world. By consciously using

the term 'renounce' here, I intend to describe the way in which religious ideals, such as asceticism and renunciation, are important in the life of ordinary villagers and are practised in the Nyaungbin Village-tract.^[5] This is not to present the simplistic view that the Burmese are totally 'spiritual.' I should like to show how otherworldly ideals (such as renunciation and detachment) and worldly desires (such as possession and attachment) repeatedly appear at various levels of village life, which gives a dynamic to society.^[6]

It has also been pointed out in previous literature that merit-making has an economic aspect. Tambiah states that *bun* in Thailand is a type of gift-giving that may be compared with other kinds of material transaction (Tambiah 1968: 51). Spiro also rightly argues that monastic offerings are not merely free gifts to the sangha, the religious order, and that the *daná* system may be seen as an exchange system (Spiro 1966; 1982 [1970]: 412). However, he was mistaken in seeing it as a 'perfectly symmetrical system, exemplifying the general pattern of reciprocity and exchange,' in which the layman provides for the monk's physical requirements while the monk provides the layman with merit (1982 [1970]: 412). Firstly, as mentioned earlier, *daná* is not merely a type of giving in which the layman is the gift-giver and the monk is the gift-taker. Secondly, it is not a closed system between layman and monk. It often involves more than two parties and the process is multiple (e.g. the layman gives to the monk and shares the merit with other people and beings; or a daughter gives (as *daná*) a gift to her mother, the mother gives it to the sangha, and the mother shares the merit she acquired with her daughter).^[7] Thirdly, it is not the monk that provides merit; the monk is only a 'field of merit' and it is the law of cause and effect that provides merit.

If we limit our argument to the transaction between layman and monk, it could be said that, in the long run, it is an exchange system in which laymen provide material support for monks and monks provide religious (as well as other) services (but not merit) for laymen. However, it is important to note that for Burmese Buddhists the interaction must not be perceived as nor resemble an exchange. Giving to the monastic order must not look like a payment for the services they have provided. Every effort is made to divert the act from becoming a payment. It must not even look like ordinary giving. It is performed as *daná*, as non-reciprocal and spontaneous giving for the sake of merit and as an offering from the lower to the higher. The sangha, for its part must not say that the amount they received from layman is not enough.^[8]

It is important to note that the border between *daná* and ordinary giving is not always clear. In the real world *daná* is not free from its social context and is bound with worldly elements. It permeates various aspects of Burmese people's lives and is so artfully practised that it is not easy to tell whether the donor is truly performing *daná* or using its idiom to achieve social ends.

The idea that by possessing objects people proclaim their identity, status and achievements in society is not new. My argument is that, for Burmese Buddhists, renouncing rather than possessing objects, is a stronger way of asserting one's identity, status and achievements. Or to be more precise, it is the politics of possession and renunciation that the Burmese practise in society. This is not peculiar to Burma, and can be seen in other Hindu-Buddhist societies. Laidlaw points out in his book, *Riches and Renunciation*, that among Jains in India, 'there is a sense in which public religion can be seen as a social investment strategy. It advertises the wealth of a rich merchant family in a morally approved way, and so augments its standing in community.' (Laidlaw 1995:146) In Buddhist ontology, in which the otherworldly (*lāwkoktāra*, Pali *lokuttara*) transcends the worldly (*lāwki*, Pali *lokiya*), to give up one's possessions is regarded as higher and more valuable. Therefore more merit, as well as higher reputation, is acquired by renouncing rather than by clinging to worldly desires. I intend to describe how the concept of merit (*kútho*, Pali *kusala*) channels the flow of material goods in society and influences the way people give and exchange things, and the way they consume wealth.

Although Burmese Buddhists respect religious ideals, it is also true that they are concerned with the here and now, and it is the tension between the worldly and otherworldly that gives a dynamic

to social relations. *Daná* is a means of achieving religious as well as political, economic and social aims. By paying attention to what Appadurai calls the 'calculative' dimension of exchange (Appadurai 1986:11,13,19) or what Mauss explains as 'polite fiction, formalism and social deceit' that accompanies the transaction (Mauss 1990 [1950]: 3), I should like to describe the micropolitics of gift-giving in village life; how the donor creates social networks, displays his wealth and manipulates social relations in society.

Daná, Saydana and Detachment

As mentioned earlier, previous literature tends to see merit-making as a transaction between the laity and the sangha or the Buddha. It seems that by 'religious giving' Spiro means gifts to the religious order and by 'non religious giving' or 'secular giving' he means gifts to the laity (Spiro 1982[1970]: 109, 464,466), and tends to equate *daná* with the former.^[9] However, my data show that what differentiates *daná* from other forms of giving is not necessarily who the recipients are (laymen or monks) but the logic underpinning the act of giving. When I asked the Burmese in Yangon and in the Nyaungbin village-tract the majority said that *saydana* (Pali *cetanā*) was the most crucial for *daná*. *Saydana* in Pali means 'intention.'^[10] In Burma, in people's daily conversation, it usually refers to the pure intention of the donor, which can be likened to the English terms, 'generosity,' 'benevolence' or 'goodwill.'^[11] The term is usually described as wanting to feed others or to give to others. Daw Kyi Hla, the head of my host-family in Thaya Village, Nyaungbin Village-tract, said, '(It is) wanting to feed others, to give to others, to help others. People who have no *saydana* don't give even if they have things. They are sorry to lose.'

Daná also needs to be done with no expectation of return from the recipient, and with a sense of detachment. *Daná* is a noble act, different from other forms of giving which are based on reciprocity or worldly attachment. As my friend in Yangon told me, '*Daná* will not succeed (*daná ma myauk bù*) if you expect something in return from the other person. *Daná* is to give with the sincere feeling of wanting to give, and with no expectation of a return.' When the gift is given in this way, *daná* succeeds (*daná myauk de*) and merit is conferred on the donor. If the donor gives with no *saydana* or detachment, *daná* will not succeed.

Among the Jains and Hindus of India, it is said that a true giving must be without any desire, including the desire to acquire merit (Parry 1986:462; 1994:128, Laidlaw 2000:624). In Buddhist theory too, attainment of nirvana requires extinction of merit. However, in practice, this is not the case. Whenever I asked the Burmese people why they donate things or offer labour for religious purposes, the answer was almost always 'because I want merit (*kútho*).' In practice, the aim of *daná* is to gain merit, whereas ordinary giving (which Burmese often refer to using the verb '*páy*') is done for secular reasons, such as helping other people in need, to fulfill social obligations (*luhmúyáy*), or simply because you like the donee, and so on.

Because the intention of the donor is so important, whether *daná* succeeds or not depends largely on the donor's state of mind. Besides the significance of generosity (*saydana*), people often invoked purity of mind and delight (*pití*) in giving is also often invoked. If the intention of the donor is not pure, then *daná* will not succeed. For example, if you give a present to your boss because you want a position, *daná* will not succeed.

Thus it is not the amount you donate that counts for a successful *daná*, and this leaves room for the poor to gain great merit regardless of the amount of the donation.^[12] I asked many Burmese if the rich could gain more merit than the poor. Their answers were almost always the same, regardless of their social status, educational background, or where they lived (in the cities or in the rural areas): it is generosity (*saydana*) that is important. They often cited a saying: 'Even if what you donate is as small as a banyan seed, you can gain merit (*kútho*) as large as a big banyan tree if you donate with true *saydana*. Even if what you donate is as big as a banyan tree, you can gain merit as small as a banyan seed if you

don't donate with true *saydana*.' If a rich man donates merely for ostentation or fame or to avoid criticism, he will not gain merit. If a poor man donates very little, but does so with full goodwill, he will gain a huge amount of merit. However, Daw Kyi Hla said to me that although the amount of merit could be the same, donors can acquire more prestige by donating more: 'Those who donated 100 *kyats*, 500 *kyats* and 1000 *kyats* can equally gain merit. It is *saydana* that is important. However, by donating 500 *kyats*, you will have more prestige (*gon*) than by donating 100 *kyats*, and even more if you donate 1000 *kyats*.'

When donating, whether to the Buddha, monks, elders or the poor, it is important that the object be completely alienated from the donor: the donor must cut off all his attachments to the object if he is to gain merit. If he gives away unwillingly with a residual feeling of 'longing' (*aswè*) for the object, he will suffer demerit (*ákútho*) rather than gain merit (*kútho*). *Saydana* may be divided into 3 steps (*saydana thòn dān*): [13]

Pokbá saydana: volition that arises before giving

Monzá saydana: volition that arises while giving

Pará saydana: volition that arises after giving

In other words, the first is the wish to give, the second is happiness in giving and the third is contentment and not loss at what you have donated. When performing *daná*, it is important to accomplish these 3 steps with pure volition, because it can bring huge benefit to the donor. A monk in Pahkoukku (a town 24 miles from the Nyaungbin Village-tract) who occasionally visited Nyaungbin told me: 'It is important that the donor is completely detached (*saydana pyat*) when giving. There is attachment if he wants to give only to certain people and not to others. If you are detached (*saydana pyat*)^[14] when giving, you don't mind if the recipient gives it to poor people. If the donor feels sorry that the thing went to the poor, his *pará saydana* is not accomplished (*pará saydana ma pyat bù*).' Because the gift must be completely alienated from the donor, the recipient may in turn freely give to another without occasioning ill-feeling in the original donor. A Shwegyi man explained to me citing an anecdotal account, 'A neighboring villager offered noodles to a monk. The monk asked him, "Have you completely given it up (*saydana pyat*)?" The villager said, "Yes." Then the monk gave the noodles to a dog. The monk said to the villager, "If you feel sorry that I have given it to the dog, your volition that arose after giving is not detached (*pará saydana ma pyat bù*), and it may be a misdeed (*ákútho*)."

Ideally, *daná* requires alienation not only in the relationship between the donor and the object, but between donor and recipient as well. There is a form of giving not aimed at specific individuals. It is said that *satúdítha*, or to feed 'whomever has come from four directions (i.e. east, west, south and north)' is a higher form than ordinary *daná*.^[15] This means to feed whoever comes, whether or not acquainted ('*pokgo ma ywè*,' literally meaning without choosing the person). In the case of feeding people who come to an initiation ceremony, for example, the donor has already selected the guests unless the donor feeds *satúdítha* which includes longing for the person (*pokgo aswè*) and involves social cohesion. *Satúdítha* invokes unconditional giving, not based on social relations or any form of dependence. This indicates that the donor is not bound to the this-worldly. It is thus pure (*sinkyé de*) and confers more merit on the donor. The purer the *saydana*, the greater the merit gained. This type of feast is held mostly at New Year, when special attention is paid to religious observance and values such as benevolence and detachment are invoked. A rest house (*zayat*) opened for whoever passes by is called a *satúdítha zayat*. This kind of rest house can be seen all over Burma, usually along the road for travelers to rest. Donating a rest house is one of the good deeds the Burmese praise highly.

Giving to Laity and Giving to the Monastic Order

Feeding monks and the laity, donating religious constructions to monasteries, offering money,

robes, etc. to the sangha, giving presents to older people, giving to the poor and needy, hosting a feast for fellow villagers, may all be *daná*. *Daná* need not be a gift to a specific person. The digging of wells and ponds and the planting of trees may also be *daná*, since these provide water, which is essential to human and animal survival, and by planting trees one provides shade. [16] When I asked residents of the Nyaungbin Village-tract they almost always said they practised *daná* because they wanted to gain merit and attain nirvana or go to a better existence in the next life. It is said that in the next life one can get back what one has given away in this life (or something similar to what they have given away). It is also said that by religious giving one can compensate for sins (*apyit*) one has committed. [17]

Many forms of giving could be included in *daná*. Depending on the context, people use different words to refer to the act of giving, such as *hlu*, *sún*, *gadáw*, etc. These terms are not mutually exclusive and sometimes overlap in meaning and use. *Hlu* is to donate, to give in charity, or to sacrifice. It is a verb used frequently in various contexts. Most typically, it is used when a layman donates money, goods, food, etc. to the Buddha or to the sangha. However, the recipient need not be the monastic order or the Buddha and may be hospitals or schools. [18]

Sún (or *súnkyè*) [19] is used to describe the act of giving by monks to laymen, and never the other way round. This is because monks are higher in status than laymen. The social status of donor and recipient is an important factor when determining the usage of these terms. It may also be used when the rich give to the poor and needy, although this usage is very rare, according to my informants in the Nyaungbin Village-tract.

The verb *gadáw* [20] means to give presents with respect and gratitude and is often used when giving to the Buddha, His teachings, the Sangha, parents, teachers, and elders [21]. When one *gadáw*s something, it is always accompanied by a gesture of kneeling and praying. It is common practice for villagers to give to older people or feed them and *gadáw* them. They can do this whenever they like, but there are certain times of the year when they do so customarily. In the Nyaungbin Village-tract, in the month of Dagu [22], during the Burmese New Year Festival, young people go around the neighbourhood with buckets and pots full of water and *gadáw* water to the elders by supplying them water. In the month of Thadingyut [23], when the Buddhist retreat is over, people give what they can afford (rice, coconut, pickled tea leaves, clothes, blankets, etc.) to older people.

Giving among the laity is important as it directly affects social relations. A conspicuous type of giving to men is seen in the form of the feast, when the host invites neighbours, friends and relatives and feeds them. Feasts are held often as a part of an *ahlu*. *Ahlu*, or 'meritorious celebration' (Spiro 1970:109), includes religious ceremonies such as Buddhist initiation, annual robe offering and ceremonies to mark the donation of religious buildings and monuments. Monks and villagers are invited, the latter fed after the monks, who are served with better food. When parents hold a Buddhist initiation ceremony for their son, they invite their relatives, neighbours and friends to the ceremony and feed all the guests, who might well number several hundred. The food served depends on how much parents can afford, but is fairly standardized in the Nyaungbin Village-tract, consisting of rice, soup, boiled split pea, pork and pickled bean sprout. Some choose not to serve meat in order to avoid killing.

In Burmese society, giving to the poor is often invoked. When I gave a blanket to U San, an ex-monk and fortune-teller in Shwegyi Village, an old man of extensive knowledge but very poor, many villagers told me that what I did was good and explained to me that one could gain more merit by giving to the poor than to the rich. To give another example, I observed an *ahlu* of a successful broker, [24] a friend of Daw Kyi Hla's family, living in Pakhokku. The *ahlu* was a Buddhist initiation ceremony for the grandsons of the broker. He and his family said they held the *ahlu* not in Pakhokku but in his native village because the village was poor and they wanted to feed the villagers. They invited this village and eleven neighbouring villages. They cooked a hundred sacks of rice and fed anyone who came, and did this without financial help from relatives or friends. Villagers praised him, envied him and said that he could

gain much merit.

Giving to the poor, however, is usually not accorded high priority compared with giving to the religious order. Daw Kyi Hla, who was in her sixties and known for her devotion to religious observance, always gave when asked. She says she gives five *kyats* to female renouncers (*thiláshins*), one *kyat* to lay mendicant, and fifteen to twenty-five *kyats* as donation towards building monasteries or rest houses (*zayat*)^[25]. Generally speaking, Nyaungbin residents are willing to donate more to the religious order and less to secular institutions, such as schools^[26]. There is calculation behind the act of giving: the relative merit to be gained by giving to a monastery or to the laity; how much money should be invested; whether the merit gained is worth the amount given away.

It is not always a simple trade-off between the sum given away and the merit one gained that concerns the donor. Donation is made in a certain context and calculation is more complicated, involving social, economic and political aspects: where shall I donate (in my village or in a neighbouring village); who shall be the beneficiaries; shall I perform *ahlu* all at my own expense, or with other people's help^[27]; how grand should the *ahlu* be? A grand *ahlu* brings prestige to the donor. Some prefer to perform an *ahlu* in poor villages for several reasons: with the same amount they can hold a bigger ceremony than in the cities where things are more expensive (thus the ceremony looks more impressive and grand); they can do a favour (*ahlu* is a 'free gift') or repay an obligation or favour to the village in which they have some interest (their native village or their client's village, for example); the donor will be praised for doing a good deed to the poor and thereby have a good reputation for benevolence.

***Daná* and Ordinary Giving: ambiguous boundaries**

As mentioned earlier, the logic of *daná* is to give with generosity, with no expectation of a return from the recipient. When I asked my informants whether the giving was *daná* or not, they often said it was for *luhmúyà* (social affairs, social obligation or social relations), or said 'that is simply giving' when the answer was 'no.'

Although it is clear that an idea distinct from ordinary giving characterizes *daná*, is frequently practised, and has great significance in Burmese society, each act of giving in everyday practice is not classed as *daná* or non-*daná* nor is the border between these two types of giving always clear. During my fieldwork, I compared *daná* with other kinds of giving and investigated how and in what context they appear in daily life.

There are kinds of giving that look similar to the casual observer. However, careful examination reveals that some are performed purely (or almost purely) for *daná*, others in such a way as to combine social obligation (*luhmúyà*) with *daná*, and some mainly from social obligation and not really for *daná*. One day in Yesagyó, a town 14 miles from the Nyaungbin Village Tract, I observed a competition in which women recited religious verses in groups. After the competition well-wishers distributed candy to participants and audience. A friend who accompanied me to the competition explained that well-wishers who seek merit distribute it. When I returned to Nyaungbin, I asked the villagers what they thought about the distribution of candies. All of them said this was *daná* and that merit may be acquired from these acts. They did this in order to acquire merit and for the sake of other people.

In the village context, too, when people listen to monk's sermons (*tayà na*), well-wishers distribute candy, cheroots, pickled tea leaves, etc., to the audience. Most people say this is also *daná*, but some say this is for social relations (*luhmúyà*) as well as *daná*. For example, the daughter of U Ko Le, the head of household of my host-family in Shwegyi Village, Nyaungbin Villate-tract, told me, 'If Daw Kyi Hla performs a *káhtein* robe-offering ceremony and invites people to listen to the monk's sermon (part of the ceremony) including U Ko Le (U Ko Le's family is close to Daw Kyi Hla's family and U Ko Le's family always buys rice from Daw Kyi Hla), U Ko Le would take cheroots and distribute them to the audience, or ask Daw Kyi Hla to put them in the *gadaw pwè* (tray with offerings) she gives to the monks. U Ko Le does it for *daná*, as well as from social obligation (*luhmúyà*).'

Another similar practice is the distribution of cheroots when food is offered to monks within a week of someone's death (*yetlesùn thut*). Here, the family of the deceased invites monks to their house, offers them food, and listens to their sermon. When villagers attend this ceremony, well-wishers distribute cheroots to the audience. Some deny that this is *daná* and say this is for social relations (*luhmúyà*). They give because they are close to each other and others will do the same for them when someone in their family dies. Some say this is for social relations as well as *daná*.

Although it is difficult to make a clear distinction since their motives are not mutually exclusive, it could be said that if such gift is made from altruism, unbound by social relations (as in the case of the competition in Yesagyó, which was a public event and not sponsored by a certain family), the act is *daná*. If the well-wisher has certain ties with the beneficiaries and does a good deed partly out of social obligation, people tend to see the act as *daná* as well as *luhmúyà*. If one does it in expectation of a return or reward, the act is often seen as *luhmúyà* rather than *daná*. These cases show that in practice, although the rationale of *daná* holds, giving is so bound with worldly elements that pure *daná* is hard to find.

The boundary between *daná* and ordinary giving is not always clear also because the donor's state of mind plays a vital role in giving and because it is often observed in a variety of social contexts. *Daná* need not be accompanied by certain rituals.^[28] As a female civil servant in Yangon said, 'Say you give a pen to your friend. If you give with *saydana*, then it is *daná*. If you give someone what he or she needs with *saydana*, it is *daná*.' Or as U Ko Le explained, citing the saying of the banyan seed: If he gave one candy because this was all he could give, this is *daná*, for his heart was full of *saydana*; had he had more, he would give more. Though U Ko Le's earnings were not low by Shwegyi standards, he never had enough to feed his family. He was always asking whether he could borrow money from an wealthy acquaintance in Mandalay.

It is not always easy to identify *daná* as it occurs in daily transaction, for it need not be revealed as *daná*. I shall explain this by citing two examples.

Case 1 My Burmese friends (a brother-in-law of U Aung Win, a merchant in Mandalay who introduced me to Shwegyi Village, and his wife) did some shopping for me, buying rice, tooth paste, a tooth brush, mineral water, etc. When I tried to repay them, they said all the items except for the rice (which in fact was a present from me to U Ko Le's family) were their presents to me, and refused to accept any money. I gave them all the reasons I could think of (including that I always paid for my things when I went shopping with U Aung Win and his wife, or it would be difficult for me to come and see them again if they always paid for me like this, etc.) in an attempt to convince them they must accept the money. They then said that they would like to pay for the water at least. They said, 'The Burmese acquire merit by donating (*hlu*) water. I want to donate water to you.'

Case 2 I went to Daw Kyi Hla's house to buy jaggery because I wanted to donate it to the people working in the monastery (*wayyawutsá*) in which I stayed while I was in Yangon. Daw Kyi Hla refused to accept the money I wanted to pay her. I told her she could not and insisted on paying. She then said, 'If you give it to *wayyawutsá*, I can also gain merit.'

These cases show that the border between *daná* and ordinary giving is not clear. In both cases, I might not have noticed it was *daná* if I had not insisted on paying (because they would not have told me). Or maybe they turned it into *daná* because I insisted on paying. *Daná* can easily permeate all kinds of giving and they can be inextricably mixed. I still do not know if they were really trying to perform *daná*, or whether they were using the *daná* idiom for social ends.^[29] Maybe it was both, since for them it is like killing two birds with one stone: they did me a favour, and if they were happy about it they could gain merit as well. These cases tell us that people skillfully practise *daná* and/or use its idiom in various social interactions, thereby achieving various goals.

Possession and Renunciation

The idea that by possessing and displaying objects people proclaim their identity, status and achievements is common to many societies. Citing works of Weber, Veblen, Young and Willmott and McKendrick, Carrier shows how previous writers developed the idea of objects as status markers (Carrier 1995:2-5).

Such accounts, however, are less concerned with the cultural meanings the objects bear. Carrier introduces other approaches that see 'objects as signs,' which focus more on 'the way that objects are part of a more complex set of meanings and are implicated in a more complex process of self-identification in a universe of signs' (Carrier 1995:4). Carrier asserts, 'Objects acquire social meaning (...) based on their position in a public code that relates objects and differences between objects to social positions and differences between social positions.' Citing Baudrillard, he states that 'in having objects, people assert distinctions between themselves and other people, people who own and display other objects, so that objects are to be seen as part of "the social tactic of individuals and groups, and the living element of their aspirations."' (Carrier 1995: 5)

I agree that objects bear cultural meaning and that they must be understood in a set of meanings of which they are a part. I should, however, like to suggest that the state of possessing objects is also part of a complex set of meanings and processes of self-identification in a universe of signs. Comparing Kula goods and European treasure, Malinowski (1922) says, 'The main point of difference is that the Kula goods are only in possession for a time, whereas the European treasure must be permanently owned in order to have full value.' (Malinowski 1960 [1922]: 89) I would say that in Burma, things achieve their eternal value by being renounced.

For Burmese Buddhists, renouncing material possessions, rather than possessing them, is a stronger way of asserting one's identity, status and achievements. The Buddhist ideal is not to possess but to renounce; the ideal demonstrated by the Buddha himself, who renounced the luxurious life of a prince and attained enlightenment. Many Burmese Buddhists I met during my fieldwork in Burma often told me that they need not possess much and that they are satisfied if they have enough to live a humble life. 'If I have more, I use it for donation,' they say. What a person of wealth possesses attracts public attention, but what he has renounced in the name of merit attracts the most attention and is given enthusiastic appraisal. The more they give up, the more they are praised. By *daná* people define and proclaim their position in society. (Not everyone is always willing to donate, although for reason of space I cannot examine this point further. These people will not lose their wealth but will not be highly praised by society either, according to my informants.)

Contrary to Tambiah's model that sees gift-giving as opposed to asceticism, I argue that giving is a lay form of renunciation and asceticism.^[30] Buddhism teaches renunciation of this world. Most Burmese, however, do not renounce but live in this world. How, then, do they conform to the Buddha's teaching? How do they take the otherworldly into their life? My understanding is that by giving, i.e. renouncing what they possess, they show that they are not entirely bound by material values. Giving is therefore a form of renunciation of the this-worldly, a shunning of the material world, and an expression of the ideal of asceticism.

Renunciation of wealth is practised in Burmese villages in many ways. It is often mentioned that the highest form of giving is the building of a pagoda^[31], a form of giving open only to the rich. In the Nyaungbin Village-tract, people say that although such giving was practised till about thirty years ago, they cannot afford it anymore. Nyaungbin residents, however, do donate money to construct buildings or parts of a building, or to renovate buildings in monasteries. Daw Kyi Hla has on her own funded the building of a monastery. She also saved to sponsor an ordination ceremony for a novice who wanted to become a monk. It is regarded as a duty and a pleasure for parents to give a huge initiation ceremony for their son, and if the parents cannot afford it, they may even pawn or sell their land.

The concept of merit greatly influences the way Burmese Buddhists consume wealth. As Veblen states, the 'end of acquisition and accumulation is conventionally held to be the consumption of the goods

accumulated' (Veblen 1970[1925]: 35). This leads us to the question of consumption. Basing observation on his studies of the Muria in India, Gell sees consumption as 'a form of symbolic action.' As he points out 'Consumption goods are more than mere packets of neutral "utility"' and it is important to see 'the role they play in a symbolic system' (Gell 1986: 110). He states that 'outside a narrow range of socially legitimized consumption possibilities, the goods commercially available in Bastar markets either have no meaning for Muria or are fraught with magical dangers' (Gell 1986: 110). In Buddhist logic, complete alienation is the highest form of consumption. Consuming one's wealth in this way confers more merit, and since merit-making is such a great concern among Burmese Buddhists, it in turn brings more prestige to the donor. Building a pagoda or holding a huge feast to feed others mean renouncing ones wealth for the Buddha. Just as the Muria fishermen purchase television sets that were unusable because their village had no electricity 'to form the centerpiece of a personal collection of wealth-signifiers,' 'totalizing his biography, his labour, his social milieu, in the form of an object' (Gell 1986: 114), by performing these acts the donor 'totalizes' his biography, his labour and his social milieu^[32]. As Gell states, 'consumption involves the incorporation of the consumed item into the personal and social identity of the consumer' (Gell 1986: 112). By consuming his wealth in these ways, the donor asserts his personal and social identity and displays his achievement in life.

There are differences, however, between the consumption described by Gell and consumption in the form of *daná*. In the former case, it is the owner himself that possesses and consumes the object. In the latter, the owner gives away his wealth in the name of merit rather than possessing and consuming it himself. In other words, the owner gives up the object itself and the chance of possessing or consuming it for a nobler purpose, i.e. merit. This explains why my Burmese friends often donated to monks the presents I gave them. When I gave jaggery that I brought back from Nyaungbin to my friend in Yangon, he said he would donate it to a monastery so that not only he but also I, the original donor, could gain merit. In this way he transformed jaggery into merit and shared that merit with me.

The Use of the 'Free Gift'

The question is how do Burmese villagers balance the worldly desire to possess and the otherworldly ideal to renounce; the desire to become a man of wealth and the desire to be a good Buddhist? How do they deal with these seemingly conflicting values and what are the politics behind it?

We may here see the relation between renunciation and power common in Theravada Buddhist societies. Although *daná* does not give the lay donor the kind of power the sangha acquires by cleaving to Vinaya, it does give him prestige (*gon*) and a certain power in society. An *ahlu* given ungrudgingly, feeding a large number of people, an *ahlu* performed without the help of others, is the object of public admiration; it always becomes a topic of talk and will be impressed upon people's memory. What food they offered during the feast is a question always asked among the Nyaungbin residents. Failure to meet people's expectations, on the other hand, can result in a lowering of the donor's dignity and reputation. When I was invited to an *ahlu* held in a nearby village, Daw Kyi Hla and her family told me not to go. They said the *ahlu* was not worth going to, for the hosts of the *ahlu* never offered decent food on these occasions.

Ahlu, as well as other types of *daná*, may be compared with what Veblen (1925) calls 'conspicuous consumption,' a mark of success of the leisured class. For Burmese Buddhists, renunciation of wealth in the name of merit is the highest form of consumption, a socially legitimized way to display one's achievement in life. Great expense in *daná* is available only to the rich, and those who can afford this are the envy of society. This is how Ma Than, Daw Kyi Hla's niece and adopted daughter who is in her thirties, described an *ahlu*^[33] she encountered in Pakhokku:

'They came from Mandalay to offer *káhtein* robe to monks. It cost them about three million *kyats*. They bought lots of meat and fish in the market to offer as food to the monks. They donated soap, washbowls, toothpaste, face towels, spoons, forks, plates, electric fans, bedsteads, tables, cupboards, mattresses, etc. They

also donated by lottery. Each monk got the prize he drew, such as a cassette or a watch. This *ahlu* was performed about two years ago. No one in town had ever seen an *ahlu* as big as this. I saw them shopping in town. They were finely dressed as people are in the cities, wearing 'one-set' *longyi* and *ingyi*^[34] and jewelry. They also distributed cooked fish and rice in plastic bags to those who came to the *ahlu*. Everyone praised and envied them. They came from another city and could manage an *ahlu* as big as this. Ordinary people cannot afford such a big *ahlu* but they are rich and can afford it. If I had the money I would really like to do that, too.'

This case reveals the two-sidedness of *daná*: it is a form of renunciation of worldly possessions as well as manifestation of worldly obsessions. *Ahlu*, which involves the participation of community members, is an opportunity to display the identity of the donor: his or her wealth, power, devotion, piety and generosity^[35]. Even when in theory a simple ceremony, unaccompanied by large feasts or extra presents, would suffice for the completion of the ceremony, donors try their best to make it a huge event. For the donor, *ahlu* is a means of acquiring both merit (*kútho*) and prestige (*gon*).

It can be said that Burmese acquire 'symbolic capital' by giving up material possessions in the name of merit. In fact, beyond the seemingly conflicting values of possession and renunciation is a continuum. As Bourdieu states, 'we see that symbolic capital, which in the form of the prestige and renown attached to a family and a name is readily convertible back into economic capital, is perhaps *the most valuable form of accumulation*' in certain societies (Bourdieu 1997 [1977]: 179) (emphasis in the original).

Burmese villagers perform good deeds in villages where their relatives and clients are, or in other words, in places where there are 'networks of alliances, relationships to be kept up and regularly maintained' (Bourdieu 1997 [1977]: 178). As mentioned in chapter 3, what I found interesting was that brokers do good deeds in their clients' villages. It is not easy to find out the true intention of the donors, but people gave me various explanations which revealed why donors perform a good deed.

Performance of *daná* is costly, and this is why not everyone is willing to perform it, although they would hardly ever say so. It must be noted, however, that although it is costly, it may not undermine the donor's wealth, and can, in fact, enhance it.^[36] The brokers I cited above are successful in their business. They spend a certain amount of money performing *daná*, and it seems that this expenditure in turn brings in more money. In other words, by performing *daná* the donor acquires symbolic capital, which in turn is converted into economic capital, thereby bringing more money to the donor.

These examples suggest that there is not always a conflict between religious and other goals. One can achieve religious and at the same time other goals, for, in the Burmese system things, money, reputation, power, merit, etc. tend to go to those who achieve high religious goals. This may be desirable for those who do not entirely renounce the worldly, but can be paradoxical for true renouncers who distance themselves from the worldly because the more they distance themselves from it, the more secular things flow to them.

Further, people perform *daná* in various ways and the notion of 'symbolic capital' or political use of *daná* cannot be applied to all kinds of performance. I saw proud parents crying during the initiation ceremony they sponsored for their son; Shwegyi villagers shared water with other villagers during a severe drought when they themselves needed it for their survival. Or, if I do choose to use the notion of 'symbolic capital' here, it is in the Burmese sense. They might not accumulate capital which can be converted back into worldly economic capital, but they accumulate merit, the most valuable form of accumulation in the world of rebirth.

Conclusion

By focusing on the social and economic aspect of *daná*, I have shown how *daná* is practised in village life. *Daná* is not merely a transaction between monks and laymen but involves other parties as well. What defines *daná* is not who the gift-taker and the gift-giver are but the logic underlying the act of

giving. Giving to laymen as well as to the sangha is practised widely among the Burmese and has not only religious but also social, political and economic significance in their society.

By focusing too much on the monk/ lay relationship, previous literature presented a rather static view of *daná*. This chapter has shown the fluid nature of *daná*. People swiftly shift their emphases in their practice of gift-giving, and the practice of *daná* is more dynamic. Once we shift our attention to giving among the laity, we can see the complicated discourse of *daná* and how people skilfully practise it. *Daná* can easily permeate all kinds of giving and the border between *daná* and ordinary giving is not always clear. When practised, *daná* is often bound with worldly elements, and people often use its idiom to achieve religious as well as social ends.

I also showed how religious ideals such as renunciation and asceticism are important and practised by the laity. By gift-giving the donor gives away his worldly possessions for the sake of merit. This may thus be seen as a lay form of renunciation. The monks have no monopoly of religious ideals. Although the laity do not fully renounce this world, they practise religious ideals in their own way and religious ideals can be found here and there in the everyday life of the village society.

It is among these intricate relations between the this-worldly and the otherworldly that Burmese villagers play politics. Religious ideals greatly influence the way villagers give and exchange things and the way they consume wealth. As the Buddhist ideal is not to possess but to renounce, renunciation is a stronger way of asserting oneself and Burmese Buddhists often proclaim their identity, status and achievements by renouncing objects. The Burmese do respect wealth but according to the Buddhist ideal its renunciation is regarded as nobler than possession.

Daná, which provides an opportunity for one to show what one has renounced in the name of merit, also provides an opportunity to display one's wealth and power. It is at the same time a form of renunciation and a form of manifestation of power. By giving the donor not only aims to acquire merit but also manipulates (wittingly or unwittingly) meanings such as piety, prestige, power and generosity, thus seeking to maintain or enhance his position in society.

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[1] Burmese is rich in terminology describing various types of giving and it is difficult to find the English equivalent to these terms. The term *sunkye* will be described further in the next section.

[2] The Burmese term '*lu*' means human or people in general, but often refers to laity as opposed to monk.

[3] *Nats*, often explained in English as 'spirits', take many forms. For example, there are *nats* living in *nat pyi* (the abode of *nats*), which consists of six levels and comprises part of the thirty-one planes of existence, or *nats* living in the human plane of existence.

[4] It is noteworthy that Egge points out the 'ascetic feats of generosity' praised in the Vessantara Jataka. In the Vessantara Jataka, the true ascetic is identified not with the mendicant but with the donor. (Egge 2002: 35-36) Strong also suggests that there is an important correlation 'in the Vessantara story between the perfection of a layman's generosity and the monastic career.' This is because Vessantara manages to lead a life very similar to that of a monk (by leading an ascetic life in the forest) while remaining layman. (Strong 1990: 107-108)

[5] The Nyaungbin Village-tract, where I conducted fieldwork for over a year, is in Magwe Division, Upper Burma. The village-tract is an administrative unit consisting of several villages. The Nyaungbin Village-tract consists of eight villages. I mainly stayed in two of the villages, Thaya and Shwegyi. I use fictitious names to the locations below township level, and to my informants, for reasons of anonymity.

[6] Tambiah also later asserts that: 'the layman rooted in this world and engaging in gift giving is in one sense behaving in a manner that parallels the behaviour of the ascetic monk.' (Tambiah 1970:212); 'The ethical aspect of giving, of the freely given gift, is that the gift represents the giver, that the giver is giving something that belongs to himself, that indeed he is giving himself up. () In so far as this attitude is represented in the intention of the layman, then it is quite plausible to argue that from his own inferior level of world-rootedness he is "surrendering" himself through the medium of giving up his

worldly possessions, which are part of him.' (Tambiah 1970:213) However, he does not explore this point further and, having mentioned this briefly, he goes back to the same conclusion he presented in his earlier work, asserting the opposition between gift-giving and asceticism, between householder and monk and between secular life and sacred life (Tambiah 1970:343)

[7] This is also pointed out by Strenski, who states that giving to the sangha should be interpreted as an instance of general exchange rather than restricted exchange. (Strenski 1983)

[8] Strenski also states how attempts are made to escape reciprocity. (Strenski 1983: 472-473)

[9] Spiro's usage of the terms 'religious giving' and 'secular giving' has no indigenous roots. Spiro states: 'Although *dāna* is glossed as giving, liberality, or munificence (cf. *Pali-English Dictionary*), it must be stressed that for the Burmese it is primarily concerned with religious giving. To contribute to the support of a monk, to erect a pagoda, to offer flowers to a Buddha image-these are *dāna*. To contribute to the support of a widow, to build a school, to bring flowers to the sick-these are not, or at best are inferior *dāna*. (1982 [1970]:108-199). He also says, '[a]lthough charity in any form contributes to one's store of meri, religious charity the building of pagodas, the maintenance of monasteries, the provision of monks, and so on is charity *par excellence*.' (Spiro 1966: 1167)

[10] Childers' *Dictionary of the Pali Language* explains this term as: 'consciousness, sense, thought, intention.'

[11] In fact the *Myanmar-English Dictionary* (1994) translates *saydana* as 'goodwill, good intention, benevolence.'

[12] My data offers proof to the contrary to Spiro's description: 'both the prestige and the merit acquired from the investment are commensurate with its magnitude. Feasting ten monks, for example, produces more merit and more religious prestige than feeding one monk.' (Spiro 1966:1168)

[13] For translation and explanation here I referred to *Teachings of the Buddha* (204-205), and to *Myanma abidan (Myanmar Dictionary)*. These three volitions are known by Shwegyi villagers.

[14] The Burmese also use expressions such as *seik pyat* and *ayon pyat*.

[15] The idea of indiscriminate giving that places no importance on the qualities of the donee can be found in the Vessantara Jataka (Egge 2002: 35).

[16] Spiro's description includes a similar remark, although he mentions it as an unusual case: 'Another elder, contrary to most of the villagers, insisted that public works for the common good-for example, the repair of roads-was also *dāna*, which would confer merit on the volunteer worker.' (Spiro 1982[1970]: 464)

[17] Spiro also says that, 'The donor may be a terrible person-wicked people attempt to expiate their sins by offering great amounts of *dāna*' (Spiro 1982[1970]: 107). This relationship between gift and sin may be compared with Indian religious gift. Parry notes that sins are passed on to priests in the form of gifts (Parry 1980).

[18] In some cases the recipient may be of lower status than the donor. When I was in Yangon a famous monk used the term '*hlu*' when he gave me a book on Buddhism. I was puzzled (because he is higher than I) and later asked another monk why. He said it was because of the book (it was a book on Buddhism) that he used '*hlu*' here.

[19] *Súnkyè* is a word similar in meaning to *sún*. Precisely speaking, the latter has a wider meaning than the former, meaning to throw away, to abandon, to give charity and dare or risk, while *súnkyè* simply means to give charity.

[20] It also means to pay obeisance with hands clasped. This gesture is done when one shows respect to a monk or a wife asks forgiveness from her husband.

[21] 'Elders' here does not mean a particular group of people with political powers who are the leaders of society. It simply means the elderly.

[22] Dagu is the first month of the year, according to the Burmese lunar calendar, and corresponds roughly to April in the solar calendar.

[23] Thadingyut is the seventh month of the Burmese calendar and corresponds roughly to October in the solar calendar.

[24] Brokers usually live in nearby towns. They buy agricultural produce (various kinds of beans, jaggery, and peanuts) from the villagers and sell it to brokers in other towns. Some brokers also sell rice that came from Lower Burma to the villagers.

[25] A *zayat* is a rest house built on waysides by well-wishers for anyone who passes by. It provides shade (which is very important in a hot country like Burma) and a place to rest for travelers and thus building a *zayat* is regarded as meritorious.

[26] Spiro says: '(...) the Burmese (...) believe that the merit is proportional to the sanctity of the recipient. Thus, as we have seen, contributions to religious structures confer more merit on the donor than contributions to secular structures, just as contributions to monks confer more merit than those made to laymen. The Burmese are lavish in their support of monks, monasteries, and pagodas, while at the same time tightfisted in their charity to the poor or for secular institutions. Why waste money on causes from which little or no merit is to be gained?' (Spiro 1982[1970]: 463)

[27] An *ahlu* performed at the donors own expense without other financial support is called *aku ma khan* (*aku* means help, *ma khan* means do not accept). When there is an *ahlu*, the guests bring some money and give it to the host's side unless the host has declared that it was *aku ma khan*. Although it is easier to give *ahlu* with the help of others, the host will be praised more if he does so with his own money without help.

[28] Here I argue against Schober who explains donations and other offerings as 'formal acts of generosity' and 'ritual exchange'. (Schober 1996: 197)

[29] I owe this view to Martin Holbraad, who pointed out the possibility of the use of the *daná* idiom for achieving social ends in these contexts.

[30] Egge says that the Vessantara Jataka 'shows that giving leads to the highest religious goals.' The gift of Vessantara's children 'becomes the basis for his attainment of Buddhahood.' (Egge 2002: 36).

[31] See also Nash (Nash 1965:116).

[32] Nash states, 'the actual hpaya built reflects a man's estimate of the height of his pon, his kan, and his wealth' (Nash 1965:117). He also says that the building of a pagoda 'is to be undertaken only at the height of one's kan, pon, and secular prosperity; it is a token that an individual is willing to give all for the act of remembering the Buddha, and it is a sign, or supposed to be a sign, that one is filled only with thoughts of the Buddha and his teachings. Building a pagoda is clearly the "royal style," the expression of kings and powerful men that they are approaching the fullness of the Buddha.' (Nash 1965:123)

[33] This *ahlu* was a *sú pàun ahlu* (*su paun* means to gather), which means that several donors gathered to perform one *ahlu*.

[34] *Longyi* is the Burmese sarong. *Ìngyi* is the Burmese garment that covers the upper part of the body. 'One-set' means the *longyi* and the *ìngyi* are made from the same material. Nyaungbin villagers hardly ever wear 'one-set' as they think that for them it is too fancy.

[35] Nash describes the Buddhist initiation ceremony as follows: 'The community is summoned (...) to witness and validate the giving, the devotion, the display, the wealth and power of the sponsors' (Nash 1965:125). Spiro also states, 'The feasting of monks, the sponsorship of an initiation ceremony, and the construction of a monastery are never performed in private. These are public events, involving conspicuous display, consumption, and sharing of wealth' (Spiro 1982[1970]: 455).

[36] This seems to be the case of one of the paradigms of 'great givers' in Buddhist stories, Anâthapindika: 'the more Anâthapindika gives, the richer he seems.' (Strong 1990:109)