

Charity

Hindu scriptures accord a high ethical value to the practice of charity. For example, in a famous passage in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad V.2, the three fundamental instructions given by Prajāpati (God) to his three kinds of children (gods, humans, and demons) are to demonstrate restraint (*damyata*), charity (*datta*), and compassion (*dayadhvam*). These three *da*'s are the means to overcome the three main forces which prevent the perception of Truth: *kāma* (desire), *lobha* (greed), and *krodha* (anger). The practice of charity will gradually remove the urge to possess objects that are not essential for one's existence. Likewise, Rigveda X.117.1 extols the virtues of giving: "The riches of the one who gives liberally do not diminish, whereas he who gives not finds no consoler."

When charity is given as one of the steps of a Vedic ritual, it is called *dakṣiṇā*. Giving in any other circumstance is *dānam*. *Dānam* is not just the act of giving. It includes the attitude with which one gives. The Taittirīya Upaniṣad (I.11.3) explains the proper attitude towards *dānam* as follows:

श्रद्धया देयम् ।	<i>śraddhayā deyam</i>
अश्रद्धयाऽदेयम् ।	<i>aśraddhayā'deyam</i>
श्रिया देयम् ।	<i>śriyā deyam</i>
ह्रिया देयम् ।	<i>hriyā deyam</i>
भिया देयम् ।	<i>bhiyā deyam</i>
संविदा देयम् ॥	<i>samvidā deyam</i>

Gift should be given with faith, it should never be given without faith, it should be given in plenty, with modesty, with awe, with sympathy. (a) Give with an attitude of worship to the Lord. One has acquired things because one was given the capacity and opportunity to do so. Give out of faith, not out of competition. With the proper attitude, *dānam* becomes an act of gratitude to the Lord for all that one has received in life. (b) If one does not have the attitude that *dānam* is an act of worship, *dānam* does not produce any benefits. (c) Give liberally, but according to one's means. (d) Give with humility and without ostentation. It is not proper to give with the attitude, "This is more than the person deserves." (e) The giver must value the opportunity to share and be thankful that he or she is in a position to do so. (f) Give with a friendly attitude. If the giver is seen as a friend, the recipient does not feel deprived of self-esteem.

The type of *dānam* described in the above passage—gifts made because it is one's duty to do so and not in expectation of a reward, charity given to a worthy person with no strings attached—is called *sāttvic dānam* by Lord Kṛṣṇa in Bhagavad Gītā 17.20. The next two verses of the Gītā describe two other, progressively less meritorious, types of *dānam*. When the giver has an expectation that the recipient

will reciprocate at some future time; an expectation of gaining *punya* from the act of *dānam*; or feels reluctance in giving, the giving is called *rājasic*. Giving at an inappropriate place or time; giving in an insulting manner; giving what one has earned through improper means; or giving to someone who will misuse the gift, is called *tāmasic dānam*.

The topic of *dānam* is treated extensively in chapters 57-71 of the Anuśāsana Parva book of the Mahābhārata, which therefore are known as the *dāna-dharma-parva* chapters. The treatment is in the form of instructions by the dying Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira. The different types of gifts one can make, the specific benefits that accrue to the giver, and many other points are discussed. A small selection from this vast storehouse has to suffice. To Yudhiṣṭhira's enquiry as to what constitutes the best gift, Bhīṣma replies: "Love towards all creatures, abstention from injury, kindly acts and favor done to a person in distress, gifts of articles made to one that begs for them, and whatever gifts are made without the giver ever reckoning them as gifts made by him constitute the highest and best of gifts. Gift of gold, gift of cows, and gift of land—these are regarded as purifying. The man who makes gifts of agreeable things and who does to others what is agreeable to others, always succeeds in obtaining things that are agreeable to himself."

Among the types of gifts one can make is *vidyādānam*, the imparting of knowledge. One who teaches earns as much merit as one who makes gifts of land or cows. Indeed, some consider the gift of knowledge the greatest gift, for it will only grow while material gifts get used up. The gift of food, *annadānam*, is said to be unequalled; the giver of food is considered to be the giver of life. As a gift of drink is also rated very highly, one should cause wells to be dug and tanks to be made. Gifts of other items necessary to support life, such as building a rest-house for travelers or giving clothes to the needy, are also recommended.

In order to cultivate the proper attitude towards *dānam*, the Vedic culture considers certain occasions as meritorious for giving. These occasions include rites of passage like the birth of a child, marriage, the 60th birthday, and the 80th birthday, visits to temples and places of pilgrimage, eclipses, and rituals for one's ancestors. Charity is considered to be a way to celebrate such occasions.

(Based on a talk by Surendra Bhardwaj, comments from K.S. Sripada Raju, and discussion in the book "Vedic Heritage Teaching Program" by Sunita and Sundar Ramaswamy)