

Water, Water, Everywhere



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Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

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The Buddhist virtue of generosity (*dana*) or sharing (*caga*) are well-known. That food is the main thing given is also well-known and a well-established custom. However, the Buddha often spoke of giving things other than food and giving to recipients other than the Sangha. One of these gifts that receives little attention and which could perhaps be re-emphasised is the giving of water. In a land such as India in ancient times, where summers could be witheringly hot, where distances between one village and the next could be long, and where most travel was done on foot, the availability of water was not just a convenience, it could be a matter of life-and-death. The Tipitaka, the Buddhist scriptures, contains a dozen or so passages about travellers running out of water while on the road, of people dying of thirst in the wilderness and of anxiety about not having enough to drink when away from home.

In the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha spoke of a traveller “tormented and overcome by heat, wearied, craving and thirsty” who then to his great relief arrives at “a pool of clear, sweet water, a lovely resting place shaded by all kinds of trees. He would plunge into that pool, bathe and drink and coming out sit and then recline in the shade of those trees.” In another *sutta* in the Anguttara the Buddha spoke of a man on a journey who runs out of water and is forced to drink from a puddle in a cow’s hoof-print because nothing else is available. Aware of these and other problems associated with the lack of clean drinking water and moved by compassion, the Buddha suggested a way to remedy it; he urged his disciples to provide drinking facilities where they might be lacking. In the Vinaya he says that when a monk arrives at a monastery or hermitage the resident monks should, apart from other gestures of hospitality, offer him water for washing his feet and then some so he can refresh his thirst. Beyond offering water to individuals one could also arrange drinking facilities for the public. The Buddha said that those who construct cisterns or reservoirs (*papa*) and who dig wells (*udapana*) could expect a good rebirth (S.I,33). He said: “One should construct cisterns in wilderness areas” (S.I,100). The Jataka expands the Buddha’s exhortation to include animals. The lovely Amba Jataka tells of an ascetic who went to great lengths to provide water for forest creatures during a prolonged drought, and how the animals repaid his kindness. The Dubhiyamakkata Jataka indicates that devout people would put large stone troughs near roadside wells so that passers-by could fill them with water for the animals. Apparently, doing this was seen as an act of merit.

Such exhortations initiated a long tradition in Buddhism of providing drinking water along roads for travellers and wayfarers. In his *Suhrillekha*, the *Friendly Epistle*, written some 700 years after the Buddha the philosopher Nagarjuna encouraged his royal correspondent to “establish rest houses in temples, towns and cities and set up water pots along lonely roads”. Ancient kings of Sri Lanka were of course famous for constructing vast dams and reservoirs and while these were of enormous benefit to people they were primarily motivated by economic and political considerations, rather than adherence to the Dhamma. But there are records from Sri Lanka, Burma and other Buddhists lands of individuals providing drinking water to wayfarers and the public simply as an act of kindly charity.

In the account of his journey through Ceylon in the 1820s the famous Bishop Heber wrote: “There is one custom here which I have not seen elsewhere, which struck me as remarkably humane; at certain distances along the road, large pots of water, with ladles attached to them, are placed for the use of travellers, and I have frequently seen my bearers take a draught with great eagerness, and then run to join his comrades at my palanquin.” This custom is not as common in Sri Lanka as it used to be, and probably not as necessary. Today there are small shops everywhere selling bottled water and soft drinks. In Myanmar the custom remains widespread and popular. It is common for groups of friends to form what are called ‘water-donating societies’ (*wainayyathulkha*) and arrange for clay water pots with drinking cups to be put at strategic places, often in their own little huts, for the convenience of passers-by.

Today, millions of people throughout the world, including significant numbers of them in Sri Lanka, are deprived of clean drinking water and appalling numbers of them are sickened by or die from drinking

contaminated water. Wouldn't it be wonderful if devout Buddhists reconsidered the virtue of *dana* beyond its traditional expressions and made donations to provide water for those in need of it? Wouldn't it be inspiring if donating a well and electric pump to a poor village was considered as meritorious as building a stupa. An NGO called Practical Action have developed a simple, cheap and effective water distiller using solar energy which they are now distributing in Sri Lanka. A recent report on the organization's web site said: "Mr Jayaratne of Andaragasyaya, Kirinda, has recently installed one to provide drinking water for his family of seven. Following an assessment of the system his family now enjoy 8-10 litres of fresh water a day. Jayaratne's wife says that, 'Previously many hours were spent on fetching water from distant places but now I use my time finishing day to day work and rearing cattle, which has enhanced the family income considerably.'" What a good impression it would give of the Buddha and his Dhamma if Buddhists organized projects like this or similar to it. The giving of water, taught by the Buddha and practiced by Buddhists for centuries, needs to be revived, encouraged, and modernized.