

Dana Economies by Siddhisambhava

Preface

I wrote this for a meeting of the European Chairs Assembly (ECA) at Taraloka in January 2009. After a short introduction from me, three Chairs briefly described how they went about running their dana economies: Dassini from the [Glasgow Buddhist Centre](#), Visuddhimati from [North London](#), and Suryamati from [Sheffield](#). I have revised the paper to include points made in the hour-long discussion that followed.



Summary of paper

After explaining why and how the paper came about, there's an outline of the monastic origins of a dana economy. This is followed by a look at the needs we need to attend to in our context ie the institution; teachers and staff (including volunteers); and recipients/donors. The last and longest section is an outline of the three ways of running a centre's economy: charging for everything; a full-blown dana economy; and – the one most centres operate – a mix of the two. There are examples of how centres go about this and pointers to the issues involved.

Introduction

To help me write a Fundraising Strategy for the July 2008 ECA, and particularly to help centres with fundraising, I 'researched' the financial situation of 14 of its members by sending a questionnaire and (with the exception of two) followed this up with a phone interview. This included twelve UK city centres, Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Glasgow, London, North London, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, Sheffield, one retreat centre, Dhanakosa, and one centre outside the UK, Dublin.

The thing that struck me most was variety. Variety in the actual financial circumstances of centres, the range of *attitudes* towards other financial matters (such as paying/financially supporting staff and/or teachers), and the variety of approaches to what we call 'the dana economy'. At the same time, some common themes and questions emerged.

The economic climate is changing, more centres are fundraising and taking fundraising more seriously. A common approach, and one I encourage, is that of committed giving ie asking people to take out what we call in the UK 'standing orders', usually on a monthly basis. (See the fundraising pages of the FWBO Centre Support website, especially **Hidden Gold**: a tool-kit on running a committed giving campaign.) How one runs both a dana economy, and a committed giving campaign, can get a little muddled up with each other.

So I thought it would help if I wrote a paper to pull out some of the issues. My motivation for doing so is two-fold. Firstly, to help us all be more aware that 'the' dana economy appears not to be one thing in the FWBO. And I'm certainly not suggesting that centres conform to a standardised model; an important principle of the FWBO is that centres are autonomous. Secondly, to help individual centres clarify their own approach, and perhaps make appropriate adjustments to how they're going about it.

The Buddhist monastic tradition of an economy of gifts

'The' dana economy, to talk about it in a general way for a moment, seems to have its inspiration based on two influences. One is the slogan that's been most commonly applied to team based right livelihood in the FWBO: 'give what you can, take what you need', with its echo of communist ideals. These days, as practised at Windhorse Evolution and some of our other businesses and centres, that model has changed, people can often opt out of 'a support package' and into a salary instead. (I won't go into all the reasons for that.) It's worth pointing out that this model and slogan doesn't necessarily translate easily from running a business to running a centre.

The other inspiration is **the Buddhist monastic code** and, with a nod of acknowledgement and thanks to an article by Thanissaro Bhikkhu in the Winter of 1996 issue of Tricycle magazine, 'The Economy of Gifts', I'd like to explore this a little to help us see how this inspiration does and doesn't, transfer to our general situation today, and to help clarify to what extent we can, and can't, apply it to how we run our Centres.

Monks and nuns are not allowed to accept money or engage in barter with laypeople. They live **entirely in an 'economy of gifts'**. The gifts range from a villager dropping rice in an alms bowl to patrons providing more substantial gifts such as land or properties. All this was, of course, in the context of a different economic system, religious culture, different climate etc. The 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 you teach what 'should' be taught, out of compassion, regardless of what will sell. There is no price for the teachings, not even a suggested donation. **The survival of the dharma depends on daily acts of generosity.** The primary symbol of this economy is the alms bowl which represents the monastics dependence on others, the need to accept generosity whatever form it takes. You don't always get what you want but you realise that you always get enough. The bowl also represents the opportunity the monastic gives others to practice the dharma, a symbol for the good they do, by giving.

There is dignity in being 'a donor'. Daily contact with donors, ie the laity, reminds the monastics that their practice is not just an individual matter, and to practice diligently as a way to repay their debt to the laity for feeding and supporting them. The alms round, giving, is moreover a reminder to the laity that the monetary economy is not the only way to happiness. This helps keep a society sane. The gently subversive quality of this system helps people keep their values straight.

It's also significant that a major point of the establishment of an Order (by the Buddha) was the **benefits of specialisation** that came with such a 'division of labour', from which both sides benefited. Without this the danger was that the dharma became limited to what will sell and what fits into a schedule dictated by the demands of a job and family.

The fact that tangible goods run only one direction in the economy of gifts mean **the exchange is open to all sorts of abuse – hence rules in the monastic code**, to stop them taking unfair advantage of the generosity of lay donors. There are rules against asking for donations in inappropriate circumstances. For me this emphasises the importance of fundraising in an ethical way, an issue that has connections with understanding the importance of financial literacy and the ethics of proper financial management. They are also rules against covering up any exceptional morsels in one's own bowl with rice, in the hope that donors will feel inclined to themselves give something more substantial. What's our modern equivalent here? Is it, perhaps, connected to the thorny issue of what our individual 'needs' are when discussing matters around support and pay? It's not always a level playing field is it, so how do we best work with the fact that some of us have financial support from partners or four families, have assets and pensions, and some of us don't? We need flexibility and trust in our attitudes and our models. I'm reminded, for

example, of an anagarika I know who intends to support herself teaching dharma by living off her inheritance. Strictly speaking you could argue that's not 'going forth' but, for me, the most important point is she has a way to support herself and teach the dharma. Most of these rules were introduced after requests or complaints by donors, the laity, who were interested in protecting their 'investment' and to ensure the monks, the teachers, walked their talk. Do we need the equivalent of a monastic code? Hopefully, practising the precepts is adequate. But let's be aware that **money can be a murky area**, and be prepared to have a good look at what's *really* going on in the way we deal with it at our centres, and what we each individually bring to this area of our lives. (See my article/talk 'Understanding money, understanding ourselves, and bringing money into our practice' on www.fwbonews.org articles and www.freebuddhistaudio as a talk and text file.)

Even with such a clear 'division of labour', or differentiation of roles, between the monastic and the layperson, such an economy was a hothouse creation that required careful nurture, patience, trust and discipline. So perhaps that's even more so the case for us, or, as one person put it during the ECA discussion, a dana economy is *always* 'work in progress'.

I now want to focus more specifically on the situation at our centres today. Based on my 'research' conversations, it seems as if, rather than a simple exchange between monastics and laity, **we have to attend to the needs of three things: the institution (centres); staff/teachers; and the recipients/donors.**

the institution

There is a massive variation in the income and expenditure of our centres. By this I mean variation in both the actual amount from certain categories, as well as differences in what the proportion of each category is to the overall income or expenditure.

Sources of income include rental income (from communities and businesses), room hire, classes, courses, day and w/e events, bodywork therapies, yoga classes, Evolution shops, carers breaks, MBCT courses, bookshop, schools visits, one-off fundraising, dana, Standing Orders, large one-off donations, legacies. Just to give you an example, some centres have no rental income from other properties whereas at London their majority source of income, 40%, is rental income from their communities, which these days charge a market rent. (I find this interesting given that when Dhammarati was Chair, one way the LBC dealt with impending bankruptcy was to start charging a more 'realistic' rent in their communities, which had previously been minimal. People protested, of course. A great example of change in a centres culture.)

Expenditure is mostly on the properties: mortgage and other loan repayments, plus all the other costs of running and maintaining a property. Another major factor for many, but not all, is 'support' ie paying people – I'll come onto that. Others costs include training, and Central Dana (all European centres with a surplus on income contribute a percentage to fund, eg the FWBO Development Team and other FWBO-wide strategic initiatives, such as the website). Some centres have no mortgage or rental costs at all. Bristol, for example, paid of their mortgage thanks to a legacy from a local Order member, the Cambridge centre is rent-free courtesy of its owners, the Windhorse Trust. In contrast, North London has a £62K mortgage, the LBC has a mortgage and loans totalling approx £1m (this includes Vajrasana, their retreat centre).

Reserves also vary. Following a major building project or financial crisis, some centres reserves have run down considerably or entirely and they are trying to build them up again. Others have healthy reserves, as indeed all charities should have to ensure their continuity in times of uncertainty. Policies vary eg to hold the equivalent of three months running costs on the centre, or £20K for each property they own in order to meet necessary maintenance costs.

'staff'/teachers

A varied situation again here. Some examples. Cambridge supports five people, 2 Mitra Convenors and 3 centre team staff, whilst Windhorse Trust pays for the Chairman. At the LBC salaries account for 40% of their £1.5m pa expenditure. Manchester's support bill peaked in 2007 at £118K, and is now approx £90K. Support costs at Norwich have increased due to an increase in levels of support. At one centre the Chair said no-one was supported and he hopes nobody ever would be supported. I don't think it was part of their mission statement but it felt a bit like that. He lives at the centre rent-free and their expenditure includes £2K for his 'time-off', plus retreats and training for him and the MC. An example that goes to show there's also variety in what is considered 'support'.

This gets us nicely into other issues under this heading. Perhaps I should have called this section 'the dana economy and the can of worms'? Who gets paid or supported and who doesn't? And how does that impact on how centres run their dana economy? Mostly, it seems, it's 'ok' to pay/pay/support people to be administrators, to support Chairs and Mitra Convenors. Some bigger centres support OM's in other roles too, being a KM, or specifically to teach so sometimes people are being paid to teach. At other centres when 'supported' people teach it's understood that they're *not* being paid to do this part of their 'work'? Some centres feel strongly that no-one should be paid to teach, or even that no-one actually is, and that this is an important tradition or principle that must be upheld. Some centres explain that that they run dharma and meditation classes by donation, but charge for yoga classes as they have to pay the yoga teacher. So it's 'ok' to pay yoga teachers, usually on the grounds that they are trained/qualified and that this is how they earn their living.

In relation to teachers coming from outside the centre the situation varies once again. Some have a policy to not give anything other than expenses. Others that are open to giving money to outside teachers seem not to have an ideological stance about this and are ad hoc or flexible in what arrangements they make re payments. Sometimes this could be a percentage split of the takings, sometimes it's a fixed amount agreed in advance, sometimes the host centre organises a collection, dana for the teacher, on top of what the centre has already charged people to attend. Dhanakosa, to look at a retreat centre here, usually manage to get general meditation teachers 'for free' (after expenses), and pay more 'specialised' retreat leaders, and it looks like (as explained in their 2009 programme) they're passing this on to retreatants by increasing their suggested donations for these retreats.

Another issue is around **volunteers**. I didn't research into this so I don't have a bigger picture at all. But I was struck by North London saying they have about 60 volunteers who clean, do reception, participate in class teams, maintain shrines, do DIY etc and that they would be unable to run the centre without this dana of practical help, time and skills. They also have a policy that if someone volunteers for 3 plus hours a week they can have a lunch, a free meditation class, and a half-price yoga class. In other words, I suppose you could say, they have a supporter care policy. Glasgow has an option that people can do work eg decorating instead of a standing order re their Dana Pass Scheme. Another centre (of similar size to north London but which employs more people to work at the centre) commented on the fact that the old criteria for being a Mitra used to include 'helping out' and that we seem to have lost something here.

recipients/donors

Just as we don't have monastics, we don't have a laity in the traditional sense either. What can be a tad confusing for us, especially when fundraising, and asking for Standing Orders, is that often the recipient of the centre's services are the same people as the donors we are approaching. This may explain some of the potential muddle about whether a centre runs a dana economy as a transactional model, as 'pure' generosity, or runs an economy that's a bit of both. When Karuna run appeals they ask the general public for donations, particularly standing orders, for people and projects in India – this is a very different set of relationships between fundraiser, donor and recipient. There is a long existing model more akin to our centres situations, of course, in the Church, who ask their congregations to give, a congregation who, in their turn, *expect* to

give – and I think they claim Gift Aid on it too. For me this raises all sorts of questions about what our centres are for, and who they're for. And this is the first place a centre needs to pay some attention to in planning a fundraising campaign: what is their vision, their mission statement, their case for support? Who is going to give them money and why 'should', or would, they want to do that?

Core Issues

A few centres charge for just about everything. Only one centre I know of (so far) runs a 100% dana economy. **Most centres run what I'll call a mixed economy**, where some things are charged for and others are by donation. Again, there's variety in how these mixed economies are run. **Many centres have set prices for yoga, bodywork, introductory and beginners classes/courses, and other public events.** These set prices usually have a sliding scale of eg unwaged, low waged, and full rate. The usual reason given for setting prices is that that's how the centre gets most of its income, and that if they ran these events on a dana basis many centres are concerned that they simply wouldn't get the same, and very necessary, income. In other words, that concern is often what stops some centres going 100% dana economy. One centre (that was in financial difficulty) said that they felt they didn't have the necessary skills to run a dana economy, switched over to charging and saw a rise in their income as a result. Another centre that charges for everything offered the view that if people pay they place more value on what they receive and are also, in the case of courses, more likely to commit to regular attendance. A centre that emphasised the dana model countered that they are trying to question that approach to values, and make more of a 'fit' with what people are learning about dharma.

One reason often cited for charging include the need to pay bodyworkers and yoga teachers. Who would argue that these people need to earn a living? Who's heard of 'free', or 'by donation', yoga classes? All the other costs of running a centre can somehow often go into a different set of logic. I do wonder if it's as simply a matter of being more straightforward about the fact that money is needed, of being transparent about costs, and 'educating people' about all this. So often the issue is to do with clarity of communication. This includes 'getting the pitch right', being able to ask with ease and confidence because we know - don't we? - that what we are offering is of value. **But it's not just an issue of what we are trying to communicate, it's also who we are communicating it to.** We are running *public* centres, so we could also bear in mind that many newcomers won't understand what we mean by 'dana', or a dana economy. Why would they?! Perhaps it would help to use English words like 'donation' as well or instead, or terms like 'an economy of gifts'? It's not always possible to have a long conversation to translate.

Events run by donation are usually events run for the more committed sangha, such as sangha night, mitra study, maybe 'higher level' meditation classes, day retreats, and festivals. The amount put in the dana bowl varies enormously, but there were quite a few comments to the effect that the amount put in the dana bowl on these occasions is often very little. One centre commented that they now no longer expect any income, ie no money in the dana bowl, at festivals. Sometimes this may be because the people attending these events are more likely to be doing standing orders. But more than one centre commented that they know this isn't the case, that there are waged committed practitioners who come to centre events, don't do Standing Orders and don't put money in the dana bowl either. They wondered if something had gone wrong in their centre's culture. Does giving the message that 'everything here is free' send the wrong message? Perhaps, another suggested, we 'should allow' people to feel the consequences of *not* giving to the centre eg if you can't afford to have the heating on..... Why can it be so hard sometimes to keep a sense of mutual appreciation and generosity alive? One person suggested the main reason for this trend may be that as people get more involved they do give, but in many other ways; it's important to remember that dana is not just money. One Chair shared with us that if you put a pair of eyes (like over Nepali stupas) over the dana bowl, it doubles the money! Another made the point that it's human nature to forget and that they had

'trained' a couple of mitras to notice, in a discrete way, who had put money in the bowl and who hadn't and then, also in a discrete way, 'remind' people of the bowl. There've been disagreements at one centre about if it's ok for an Order member, wearing a kesa, to stand holding the dana bowl. In contrast, that's the first thing you see entering another centre on its sangha night. As we've already noted, many people are uncomfortable and unconfident about asking for money, but this can be a huge problem when you are trying to run a dana economy. **How do you relate to the dana bowl?**

It can help to be **clear how much it costs to run the centre**. One centre has managed to put a cost on each person walking through the door and that's part of how they communicate that there are costs that need to be met. Glasgow has started charging for mitra study, £5-10 a class, including the notes. If someone can't afford it, that's fine. It's working ok and there've been no complaints – another example, perhaps, of 'pulling off' a change in culture. Another centre is considering a 'utility fee' for mitra study to help recover costs of the notes, the mitra convenor, the use of a room and other facilities at the centre. In many American (non FWBO) dharma centres you pay a standard 'facilities fee' and then make a donation on top for the teacher, a completely different system.

To my knowledge Sheffield is the only centre that runs a 100% dana economy. As straightforward comparisons between centres are difficult to make, I'll outline their situation in a little more detail so that their decision is in its proper context. They get and spend about £60K a year, which has been stable for a few years now, and have reserves of £30K (ie 6 months running costs). Expenditure is £26K on supporting 3 people, the rest is on overheads and running costs which includes a small mortgage. £40K of their income is donated and £20K earned. Seventy people contribute £20K in standing orders, plus a further £6K Gift Aid. £12K was put in the dana bowl, which is at everything; the content of the bowl varies enormously. The rest is one-off donations, including, recently, a small legacy. Of the earned income £14K is rental from the community in the centre. £4K is profit from yoga classes – they pay the yoga and tai chi teachers. The rest is bookshop plus bits and pieces.

Other factors no doubt play into this situation. Sheffield is a thriving sangha at the moment. They teach meditation solely in the context of Buddhism. They don't run a bookings system (which helps attract young people, by the way) and take all-comers. This often results in sixty turning up and complete mayhem on the first night, maybe 35 of whom will finish the course. (This is practically possible as the centre has a huge main shrine-room and plenty of other space.) They have a clear and well resourced (with teams of people) strategy for moving people on from beginners classes. They try not to ask for money too often, do an annual push for standing orders, remind people for a few weeks, then drop it. Success depends on getting people involved in a sense of a shared project, rather than creating a sense of buying a service. They haven't had a fundraising drive for something in particular for ages, don't do fundraising really. But then, at the moment anyway, they don't need to. They've had sound and clear financial management for some time, sold a property in a central location to buy an old church on the city outskirts, and got a £200K grant to do the roof. They are our 'purists' in terms of running a 100% dana economy and I salute them, but then they can afford to.

It seems to me **that the way our centres run their economies is often driven by the practical needs of each situation as much as, if not sometimes more than, a clear vision or policy.** I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. I am saying that it may help how we discuss and decide our policies if we can be clear, open and honest about this being part of our criteria. Similarly, if we operate on the basis of a principle, or ideological position, about financial matters, we need to make sure that it is 'true', consistent, and kind. Make sure you're not hanging onto slogans when circumstances have changed. Understand the consequences of both confusion and rigidity on relationships within the sangha. Consider, if you're in one set of financial circumstances but would like to be in a different one, developing a long term strategy, over five or ten years perhaps, to move from one model to another. Bear in mind that a dana economy is always 'work in progress'.

A potential problem with running a mixed economy is that you do have two things going on at the same time. If you don't have a clear policy, and especially clear procedures, things can get confusing. Some centres reported examples of this eg people getting uncomfortable or upset when being asked for deposits, or charges being made at events, when they were doing a standing order and their understanding of that commitment was that they didn't ever need to pay. These problems can be compounded by a reluctance to ask for money, and other issues to do with communication around money. I've heard complaints about one project that advertised itself as running a dana economy but when a 'punter' arrived they were actually charged a set minimum amount, a situation which resulted in bad feelings. The effects of this can spread beyond that particular individual or situation; you may not be aware of that happening in any obvious way.

The Glasgow Buddhist Centre have been using a Dana Pass for some years now. They ask regular attendees of the centre to work out how many things they'd usually come to in a month, calculate what they'd usually spend and then pay by doing a standing order instead. This system has worked ok for Glasgow, it gives them an income they can rely on, though they see it as 'work in progress'. Perhaps it's not so different from using 'suggested donations'. I understand it can be hard for people to know exactly how much to give and that 'suggesting' an amount, or using a gym membership approach to the centre can help people to figure that out. This is probably easier terrain for retreat centres, who often use 'suggested donations'. It's more complex at centres, where people come and go more, and where it's more of a challenge – though also part of the point – to have an ongoing relationship with the place and the sangha there.

If you're thinking of launching a campaign for standing orders, or re-thinking a dana economy, be aware that **it may be problematic, or confusing, or even counterproductive, to use the term dana, or dana economy if you go about it in a way that encourages a transactional relationship.** It may also even limit your income. Discussing this with a friend in Glasgow, she was horrified to realise she wasn't actually being generous at all (especially given she's on a professional income), but was getting 'a bargain' in going to several things a month for a tenner – and increased the size of her standing order. I'm concerned, especially when trying to encourage more centres to increase their sustainable income by running a campaign for regular and committed giving, that they do that in a way that strengthens sangha and a culture of generosity, an economy of gifts. And not in a way that encourages a consumerist approach to the dharma, of buying a service, getting a bargain, or a good deal. The Dharma is *always* a good deal! The 'price' is besides the point.

Another potential problem, related to this issue, is that if we are promoting the idea of standing orders as buying a service, can we really call it a gift – and claim gift aid? The north London centre had a lot of discussion in 2008 on how to meet the legal requirements for Gift Aid, following a substantial Gift Aid audit at the Karuna Trust who are tenants of the centre. You could go so far as to say that it's against the law to claim gift aid on a standing order that is clearly being given for something in return, ie is not a gift. North London now has a system where events are either a charge, or a donation. They consider it important to ask for these donations in the right way so that it is very clear it is a donation. They ask people to fill in a gift aid reclaim tax form on the day, it's an envelope - they got the idea from St James, Piccadilly. (They've recently re-designed the outside of this envelope, dropping the word 'economy' from the term 'dana economy' and also using the word 'donation'.) Doing gift aid forms on an event by event basis makes for more work for the book-keeper but they've got a system going and reckon it's worth it.

Dhanakosa retreat centre reported that when they moved from fixed prices to suggested donations in 1992 they wrote to the HMRC (the tax office) and got it in writing that they would treat donations as Gift Aid. Dhanakosa's system is to take a deposit to hold a place, and then ask for a donation.

For more information and a guide on Gift Aid, go to the fundraising section of www.fwbo-centre-support.org Further help is available at www.giftaidhelp.org an online gift aid forum with a dedicated panel of experts launched at the end of October 2008 by the Institute of Fundraising.

Conclusion

I would like to emphasise again that **I'm not encouraging uniformity in our economies**, and that it would help to not assume we all mean the same thing by 'dana economy', or are going about it in the same way. I hope it's helped to outline how **there's three different ways of running your centre's economy**. Charge for everything. Run a full-blown dana economy. Or do a bit of both – and understand the implications of how you go about that, being especially careful with how you motivate people to do committed giving, and how that relates to other giving, or not.

It can help to hear about what other centres do, but they are all so different, **there's a limited value in comparison. As well as responsibly taking your particular financial circumstances into account, discover what your centre's strengths are and look at how to build on them.**

Please bear in mind that my 'research' included only 14 centres, mostly in the UK. I'm aware that it's referring to situations where there are properties to run and people to support and that there are many **other FWBO groups**, and maybe even centres, where this is not the case. For me this **doesn't exclude the possibility of running a dana economy**, or asking friends and supporters to commit to regular giving. You can use this reliable income to improve your resources, whether that be the shrine, a library and so on, you could use it to improve your publicity, increase your outreach activities, help provide free retreat places for people who can't afford it, etc etc.

Please also bear in mind that this is a snapshot in time, the research done in the summer of 2008 and the Chairs discussion January 2009 and that the situations referred to will no doubt change.

As always, I'm open and interested in any feedback or comments on this paper and please share it with others who you think may find it interesting or helpful. Thanks for reading.

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