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CHAPTER II

BUDDHISM AND HOSPITALITY

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED AND ACTING VIRTUOUSLY

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We can learn quite a bit about Buddhist understandings of hospitality by examining one of the terms frequently found in Indian Buddhist Sanskrit texts and commonly translated as “hospitality.” The term, *atithisatkāra*, means “doing” (*kāra*) something “good” or “virtuous” (*sat*) for a “guest” (*atithi*). This etymology raises two interesting questions for an investigation into Buddhist ideas of hospitality. First, what constitutes a good deed (*satkāra*)? This is a crucial question for Buddhist ethics. Second, what do we mean by “guest”? The term *atithi* has a complex etymological history, with important implications for Vedic and astrological studies, but two etymologies are most common, and both of them are illuminating. We can understand the term as deriving from the Sanskrit root *at*, which means “to go constantly,” “to walk,” “to wander.” Hence, someone who is *atithi* is “on the move.” He or she isn’t a permanent resident in one’s home; rather, that person is a visitor, one who is passing through. *Atithi*, however, can also be understood as the antonym of *tithi*, which denotes a specific time—an auspicious one, at that. In this sense, *atithi* refers to “one who has no fixed time for coming” or “one who has arrived outside the auspicious lunar days.” In other words, it refers to someone who has arrived unexpectedly, at a random time; or worse, at the wrong time.

Though there is an abundance of material in Buddhism about *planned* giving—what to give to the monastic community, where to give it, when to give it, and how much merit such offerings will generate for the donor—the category of *unplanned* giving has received less attention. Yet, this category of unplanned giving is addressed explicitly in Buddhist narrative literature. Accounts in these materials of Buddhist laymen and laywomen interacting with Buddhist monks, who all too often arrive unexpectedly and at what seems to be the wrong time, form a template for Buddhist hospitality more generally. Even today, among Indians of all faiths, there is a common saying, *atithi devo bhavaḥ*, meaning “the *atithi*—the guest—is god.” I have heard this said by my friends and teachers in India, whether Buddhist, Hindu or Jain, when I or someone else arrived unexpectedly and tea and biscuits were quickly conjured. I have also heard this said by strangers on trains and buses, when they shared food with me or I with them.

The way one treats a guest, I have been told, says a lot about one’s relationship with the divine. While writing about the logic and practice of Hindu worship in central India, Lawrence Babb explains, “the entire sequence [that constitutes *pūjā*] . . . has one overall purpose: to make the [god or] goddess feel like a welcome guest.”¹ Worshipping the god or goddess is a form of hospitality,

and hospitality is a form of worship. Hence, the *atithi* is to be treated as a god. But what does one do when an *atithi*, a guest, arrives unexpectedly at an importune time? What actions in such a situation are virtuous? What, in the end, are the component parts of hospitality?

In addressing these questions, I will consider a number of stories from the *Divyāvadāna*, or “Divine Stories.” The text is a vast compendium of Indian Buddhist narratives written in Sanskrit from the early centuries of the Common Era. Its stories have since spread throughout Asia, as both narrative and narrative art, leaving an indelible mark on Buddhist thought and practice. Many of these stories were incorporated into the monastic code of the branch of Buddhists known as the Mūlasarvāstivādins, and this canonical text was later transmitted to Tibet, China and beyond. As a result, scores of generations of Buddhists in Asia have considered these stories “the word of the Buddha” (*buddhavacana*), and have repeatedly recited, reworked, painted and sculpted them. These are, in short, some of the most influential stories in the history of Buddhism.

Many of the stories in the *Divyāvadāna* feature accounts of people who, suddenly and unexpectedly, meet up with the Buddha; one of the senior monks in his order, such as Mahākāśyapa, Mahākātyāyana and Mahāmaudgalyāyana; or a solitary buddha, an awakened being, like the Buddha, but who doesn’t found his own monastic community. All of these figures are *arhats*, a term that comes from the Sanskrit root *arh*, meaning “to be worthy” or “to deserve.” An *arhat*, therefore, is someone who is “worthy” and “deserving.” But worthy and deserving of what? The answer, according to the *Divyāvadāna*, is that they’re worthy and deserving of offerings (*dakṣineya*), food offerings in particular, by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

An *arhat* is a particularly good field of merit (*puṇyakṣetra*) for devotees to “plant” an offering. “Thus,” as John Strong notes, “any good (or bad) action directed toward [such a being] can have positive (or negative) karmic results beyond all expectations.”² In “The Story of Menḍhaka,” for example, during a famine, with stocks of food nearly depleted, the householder Menḍhaka, his wife, son, daughter-in-law, servant and maid happen to meet a solitary buddha, and each of them give him the last bit of food that they possess. They then make fervent aspirations for more food, all of which are fulfilled *immediately*. When the king hears of this, he exclaims: “Oh! This field is so fertile and faultless! A seed sown today bears fruit today as well!” (Divy 135.12–13).³ Since the solitary buddha constitutes a particularly fecund field of merit, the karmic results of their respective offerings are obtained on the same day. As the Buddha explains:

If, monks, beings were to know the result of charity and the consequence of offering charity as I know the result of charity and the consequence of offering charity, then at present they would never eat the very last remaining mouthful of food without giving it away or sharing it, if a worthy recipient of that food were to be found. (Divy 298.2–7)

Intrinsic to these encounters is an exchange—laypeople offer food to monastics, and monastics in turn offer those laypeople merit. This “food for merit” exchange is made explicit in “The Story of Sahasodgata.” A solitary buddha who is traveling through the countryside arrives at a park on the outskirts of a town but then decides to go elsewhere. A householder happens to see him and says, “Noble one, why are you turning back? You are in want of food, and I, of merit. Take up residence here in this park and I’ll support you with alms with no interruption” (Divy 312.15–16).

But there is a problem: solitary buddhas, such as those in “The Story of Mendhaka” and “The Story of Sahasodgata,” cannot be *sought out* as the recipients of offerings. They live “in remote areas,” as the texts tell us (e.g. Divy 88.14–15; 132.21), and they like to roam, following the famous prescription from one of the Pali suttas (*Sutta Nipata* I.3; *Khaggavisana Sutta*) to “wander alone like a rhinoceros.” It is their offering to the laity that they come and accept the laity’s offerings, providing them a chance to transform their gifts into merit.

Moreover, in addition to living in remote areas, Buddhist monks of all kinds tended to be “on the move.” In the era before permanent monastic settlements, which probably occurred in the early centuries of the Common Era, monks would “walk” and “wander” (*viharati*) for nine months of the year and then settle somewhere for the three months of the rainy season, when travel was difficult, to study and meditate. These settlements came to be known as *vihāras*, since they were places in which monastics could do just what they did when it wasn’t raining: “live,” “pass time,” and, to be sure, “walk about.”

The “walk about” component of their lives was crucial. Monastics have always been dependent on the largesse of the laity for their food, and during this period of Buddhism monasticism, monastics would normally go on an alms round each day to find food for themselves. This was the case whether they were wandering the countryside or settled in a *vihāra*. They would wander from home to home, generally without predestination, until their bowls were full, accepting whatever food they happened to receive. That was their main meal for the day.

Although lay people could make arrangements to invite the Buddha or the full monastic community to one’s home for a meal—a practice amenable to the very rich, such as kings, but out of the question for the poor and middle class—one could not invite a single monk to one’s home, at least not according to the earliest strata of material. One could not, therefore, simply invite a senior-most monk to one’s home and feed him, even though he was worthy of offerings. Moreover, those spiritually advanced monks who were *arhats* were often the most peripatetic. They would wander constantly, from one region to the next, not domesticated by monastic structures.

This left the average layperson in a quandary: how could someone of ordinary means afford to feed the entire monastic community or just find a single monk to feed, especially one who was eminently worthy? The *Divyāvadāna* offers no easy answers, nor do other Indian Buddhist texts. There simply

aren't many chances for a layperson to make food offerings. What is stressed, however, is that one should make the most of any such opportunity that arises, even if one isn't particularly prepared to do a "good deed" for the "guest" who suddenly appears.

Some of the most famous stories in Indian Buddhism address this problem. Probably the most famous of all concerns King Aśoka, the great Indian monarch from the third century BCE, whose empire stretched from present-day Afghanistan to Bangladesh and whose conversion to Buddhism and righteous rule are still remembered through his famous pillar inscriptions. The life story of King Aśoka is told in great detail in the *Divyāvadāna*, stretching back to a previous life of Aśoka, when he was a boy named Jaya in the city of Rajagṛha, and extending to his last days when, imprisoned by his heir-apparent son, he gave away all his possessions to the monastic community. Central to this narrative is the offering he made when he was the boy named Jaya, for we are told that this very offering culminated in his becoming a great monarch and, in the end, a great patron of Buddhism.

As we read in "The Story of a Gift of Dirt":

The Blessed One arrived at the main road [in Rajagṛha]. Two little boys were there. One was a son from a very prominent family, and the other a son from a somewhat less prominent family. They were playing at building houses in the dirt. The first of them was named Jaya (Victory), and the second was named Vijaya (Conquest). Both of them saw the Buddha, whose body was adorned with the thirty-two marks of a great man and who was a sight one never tires of seeing. The young boy Jaya, thinking, "I'll give him some barley meal," threw a handful of dirt into the Blessed One's begging bowl. Vijaya approved of this by respectfully folding his hands together.

As it is said:

He saw the greatly compassionate self-made one
whose body radiated a halo a fathom wide.

With a resolute face, and instilled with faith,
he offered some dirt

to the one who brings an end to birth and old age.

After making this offering to the Blessed One, Jaya then proceeded to make a fervent aspiration: "By the root of virtue, may I become king and, after placing the earth under a single umbrella of sovereignty, may I serve the Lord Buddha."

The Sage perceived the boy's disposition,
and knowing that his fervent aspiration was proper,
saw that the desired result would be attained
because of the power of his field of merit.

He therefore accepted, with compassion, the proffered dirt.

And so, that seed of merit that was to ripen into Aśoka's kingship was planted.
(Divy 366.5–23)

There are some notable features of this story that tell us a lot about Buddhist notions of hospitality. First, the intention of the giver is important. Aśoka, in

his former incarnation as Jaya, sets the intention to give some barley meal as an offering, even though he has none to give and, instead, offers the Buddha a handful of dirt. Dirt is not food, and as such the gift has very little utility. Yet Jaya had a good “disposition” (*bhāva*), in large part, no doubt, because he is blessed with faith.

Faith is like the price of admission into the system of Buddhist morality—not faith *in* Buddhist morality per se, but the faith that admits and empowers one as a Buddhist. Faith is the seed money that allows one to invest in a Buddhist future. It allows one to buy in, creating the possibility for “spiritual growth.” To use the analogy of a card game, faith is like the chips one receives to ante up for a first hand. While one can perform good or bad deeds without faith, one does so not as a Buddhist, and the rewards are limited. To be a Buddhist, faith is a requisite. And once one has faith, one can participate in the Buddhist moral economy, readily accruing moral value through good deeds.

The value of the deed that Jaya has performed is apparent by the success of his “fervent aspiration” (*praṇidhāna*), which the Buddha affirms was “right” or “proper” (*samyak*). The accrued merit from the offering is both “root” and “capital,” the basis for future good deeds and attainments, and the purchase-power for current ones. Roots of virtue, Luis Gomez observes, “are like roots (*mūla*) because, once performed, they remain as the basis for future virtue, and, if properly cultivated, grow, mature, and bear fruit.”⁴ In this case, as our narrator the Buddha explains, Jaya’s offering functioned as a “root” that helped him develop into a world-conquering monarch. (Actually, the text calls it a “seed of merit,” combining two different agricultural metaphors, that of “roots” and “seeds.”) Yet the term *mūla* also refers to one’s capital or financial principal. To use a certainly false cognate, *mūla* here really is the moola, Jaya’s bank of virtue that allows him to “cash in” for a fervent aspiration.

Second, the recipient of one’s offering is important. Jaya gives and, as a result, receives, yet the rate of return is exceptionally good—universal monarch for handful of dirt—because the recipient of his offering is the Buddha, who is an excellent “field of merit” (*puṇyakṣetra*) in which to plant merit-seeds.

Third, the value of the object that is given is important, though one might not know it from this story. Nevertheless, “The Mahāyāna Sūtra On the Topic of Giving” simply lists 37 gifts and their results, with no mention made of the proper intention or recipient. For example,

[10.] He gives a gift of food that results in his being free from the cravings of hunger.

[11.] He gives a gift of drink that results in his being free from thirst everywhere in all his lives [yet to come]. (Divy 482.13–16)

Buddhist materials often minimize the value of one or more of these variables as a way of emphasizing the worth of the other (or others). In the “Story of Candraprabha,” for example, an evil brahman asks King Candraprabha for his head, so the king decapitates himself and offers his severed head to the brahman. The value of the offering is negligible. The brahman, after receiving

the king's head, simply tosses it aside, unsure of what to do with it.⁵ The field of merit constituted by the recipient is also negligible. It's a barren field for sowing seeds of virtue. What is emphasized, however, is the power and propriety of the king's intention. Good donors have good dispositions in general, and good intentions when they make offerings.

The importance of good intentions, as opposed to offerings with great use-value, is shown quite graphically in an episode from "The Story of a Woman Dependent on a City for Alms." In the story, a leprous beggar woman wandering for alms happens to see the venerable Mahākāśyapa, who "instills faith through his body and through his mind" (Divy 82.13–14), and decides to make him an offering.

Then the venerable Mahākāśyapa, understanding her thoughts with his mind, held out his begging bowl. "If you have anything to spare, my sister, please put it in my bowl."

Cultivating faith in her mind, she poured [some rice-water] into his bowl. Then a fly fell in. She began to take it out when one of her fingers fell off into the rice-water. She reflected, "Although the noble one, out of respect for my feelings, hasn't thrown [this rice-water] away, he won't partake of it."

Then the venerable Mahākāśyapa, understanding her thoughts with his mind, right before her eyes, sat down against the base of a wall and began to eat.

She reflected, "Although the noble one, out of respect for my feelings, has partaken of this, he won't think of this food as a proper meal."

Then the venerable Mahākāśyapa, understanding her thoughts, said this to that woman who was dependent on the city for alms: "Sister, I am happy! I can pass the whole day and night on the food [that you have given me]."

She became very excited. "The Noble Mahākāśyapa has accepted alms from me!" Then, while cultivating faith in her mind for the venerable Mahākāśyapa, she died and was reborn among the gods in the heaven known as Tuṣita ("Contented"). (Divy 82.13–14)

If the leprous beggar woman's offering of rice-water (with finger) were to be judged by its use-value, even though Mahākāśyapa managed to make a meal of it, she no doubt would have earned very little merit. With the enumeration of offerings and their rewards in the previously mentioned "The Mahāyāna Sūtra On the Topic of Giving" as a benchmark, an offering of some rice-water wouldn't merit rebirth among the Tuṣita gods. While the woman may have been just one small offering away from attaining the karmic threshold that would allow her such an auspicious rebirth, the emphasis here is on how faith can elevate even a mundane offering into something, karmically speaking, very valuable.

Guests offer the devotee an amazing opportunity. While Mahākāśyapa received a meal, the leprous beggar woman secured herself a place in heaven. The donor, as such, is the biggest beneficiary. Mahākāśyapa gave her the gift of being able to give to him. Giving, as such, is its own reward, especially if one gives out of faith and (or) gives to a worthy recipient.

To whom, then, should one make offerings? Everyone, for one never *really* knows what kind of person one stands before, whether the beggar in your presence is a thief or a saint or a god. For example, later in “The Story of a Woman Dependent on a City for Alms,” Śakra, the lord of the Trāyastriṃśa gods, hears that the leprous beggar woman, as a result of her offering, has been reborn in the Tuṣita heaven, one heaven above his, and he gets jealous. He tries to entice Mahākāśyapa, whom he knows likes to give the gift of receiving alms from the poor, to accept his offering as well so that he too can achieve a large reward of merit. Śakra, we are told, “magically created a dilapidated, broken-down house in which crows lurked, on a road where poor people lived. Then he magically transformed himself into a weaver dressed in hempen rags and wearing a rumpled turban, with cracked hands and feet” (Divy 83). Even gods can be beggars and vice versa.

This past week, in one of my classes, I was screening a film on hijras, members of a “third gender” on the subcontinent, whose repertoire of behaviors blurs the distinctions between man and woman, Hindu and Muslim. Though they are social outcasts in many ways, shopkeepers routinely offer them alms, in part because hijras are thought to have the power to bless and curse, but for other reasons as well. In response to the question of why he gives alms to hijras, one shopkeeper in the film, explains, “You never know what external form souls will take when they appear before you.” A hijra might be a god, too.

For a person of faith, the chance to make an offering to a guest is a tremendous opportunity to earn merit and plant new roots of virtue. And so, one must treat “the *atithi*, the guest, as a god,” offering him whatever one can: the very last morsel of food in one’s possession, as the Buddha advises; some rice-water, if that’s all one has; or a handful of dirt with the hope that it will suffice—by dint of a good disposition, faith, and some wishful thinking—as a handful of barley meal. Hospitality is a very effective way to progress on the spiritual path.

Hospitality of this kind, it should be noted, continues to be an important concern and practice for both Buddhists and Indians. Recently, the Government of India’s Ministry of Tourism has taken up the saying *atithi devo bhavaḥ* and introduced the Atithi Devo Bhavaḥ Program. According to their website—atithidevobhava.com—“The concept [guest as god] is deep-rooted in modern progressive India. Even [the] Government of India believes in the concept.”⁶ Considering the enormous numbers of migrants that attempt to flee persecution and inequity each year, I can only hope that more countries come to believe in the concept as well, greeting and welcoming those “on the move,” even those dressed as beggars who arrive at inopportune times. That would truly make the world a better place.

- 38 Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe,” 7.
 39 Kearney.
 40 Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe,” 8.
 41 Ibid.
 42 Cobb, 4.
 43 Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning Between Jews, Christians and Muslims,” in *Modern Theology* 22 (2006), 345–66, 349.
 44 Ibid., 349.
 45 N. Adams, “Making Deep Reasonings Public,” in *Modern Theology* 22 (2006), 385–401, 395.
 46 W. Taylor, *How to Pitch a Tent: A Beginner’s Guide to Scriptural Reasoning* (London: Center for Reconciliation and Peace, 2008).
 47 Ford, “An Interfaith Wisdom,” 356.
 48 Ford, “Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together.” Address at the Inauguration of Dr. Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary and Professor of Patristics, Thursday 10th March 2005, 1–15, 4.
 49 Ibid., 10.
 50 S. Kepnes, *A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning* (New York: Colgate University), 9.
 51 Ibid., 11.

Notes to Chapter 10: *The Awakening of Hospitality*

- 1 Richard Kearney is the Charles Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College and Director of the Guestbook Project. This international project has organized a series of seminars and conferences on the themes of “Hosting the Stranger” and “Facing the Other in Divided Communities.” For details of the various publications and documentaries produced by the Guestbook Project, including recordings of most of the papers published in this volume, based on an international conference held in Boston College (May 2009) under the title of “Interreligious Hospitality,” see www.guestbookproject.com. For fuller information on the other publications related to the conferences see the editor’s Introduction to this volume.
- 2 Retold here based on Paul Reps, ed., *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings* (Rutland, VT: Anchor Books, 1957), 41.

Notes to Chapter 11: *Buddhism and Hospitality*

- 1 Lawrence Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 43.
- 2 John Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka (Aśokāvadāna)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 57.
- 3 E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil, eds, *Divyāvadāna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886).
- 4 Luis Gomez, *Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light*

(*Sanskrit and Chinese Version of the Sukhāvātīyūha Sūtras*) (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Kyoto, Japan: Higashi Honganji Shinshū Ōtani-ha, 1996), 332.

- 5 This isn't mentioned in the Divyāvādāna version, but it is in the recension in the *Sūtra of the Wise and Foolish*.
- 6 Government of India's Ministry of Tourism, "FAQ," <http://atithidevobhavah.com/faq>

Notes to Chapter 12: *The Dead and the City*

- 1 A version of this paper was presented at "Interreligious Hospitality," (conference, Boston College, Boston, MA, February 14, 2009). I thank Richard Kearney for inviting me to write the presentation. While this essay will treat the subject of hospitality among Muslims in the Eastern Mediterranean, it does not purport to represent the entirety of the Islamic tradition, as practices and habits (as will become evident early in the essay) may have been markedly different according to region. By the "Levant" I mean the Eastern Mediterranean, or the area covering the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine. I have opted not to use standard Arabic transliteration for simplicity, however, the *hamza* is indicated by (') and the *`ayn* by (').
- 2 Usama `Anuti, *al-Haraka al-adabiyya fi Bilad al-Sham khilal al-qarn al-thamin `ashar* (Beirut: Lebanese University Press, 1980), 77.
- 3 Muhammd b. Isa b. Ibn Kannan, *Yawmiyyat shamiyya*, ed. Akram Ahmad al-`Ulabi (Damascus: Dar al-Tabba', 1994), 311–12. It should be noted that I will also be using the original autograph manuscript of the book under a different title cited below.
- 4 For example, Muhammad Khalil al-Muradi, *Silk al-durar fi a`yan al-qarn al-thani `ashar*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Islami, n.d.), 2:2; Muhammad b. Isa Ibn Kannan, *al-Hawadith al-yawmiyya li-tarikh ahada `ashara wa alf wa miyya*. MSS Ahlwardt 9480, 74b; and the example in the section below, "The Saint and the City."
- 5 There has been much excellent work on the *`ulama'* but the classics remains Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), and Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education, 1190–1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- 6 Ibn Kannan, *Yawmiyyat shamiyya*, 109.
- 7 The authoritative biographical dictionary of the scholars and notables of the eighteenth century is al-Muradi's *Silk al-durar* cited herein. Despite its flaws, to date, the most imaginative treatment of the biographical dictionary as a social practice is Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 8 Ibn Kannan, *Yawmiyyat shamiyya*, 189.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 314. For the biography of the deceased under the name "al-Azbaki," see al-Muradi, *Silk al-durar* 2:116.
- 10 Ibn Kannan, *al-Hawadith al-yawmiyya*, 74b. The editor of Ibn Kannan's