



The Ethics of Esteem

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Abstract

This paper discusses a number of South Asian discourses on the gift that were composed in the medieval period, mostly in the eleventh–thirteenth centuries C.E. I consider several Theravāda anthologies on lay conduct that discuss *dāna*, together with several Hindu Dharmaśāstra digests on the gift (*dānanibandhas*) and Jain texts on lay morality (*śrāvakācāras*), and trace out quite remarkable similarities in their terminology, interests, and formal concerns regarding the gift. I am interested in how these discourses scrutinize the face-to-face hospitality encounter, and how this scrutiny is a kind of critical and second order reflection on ethical questions. I argue that these gift discourses articulate a moral point of view, which I call an “ethics of esteem,” in which the chief moral disposition that a giver should possess is a feeling of unquestioning esteem towards the recipient. Gifts are conceived to flow upwards to worthy recipients (usually monks, nuns and Brahmins) out of esteem and devotion. Conversely, gifts made out of compassion or pity to the needy are not so highly valued.

In a story about *dāna* told in a medieval Theravāda Buddhist anthology on lay morality, we are confronted with royal greed, political contestation, and threats of armed rebellion—all over the right or privilege of giving gifts to the Buddha. The story tells of King Bandhumā, the father of the Buddha Vipassī.¹ As the father of this Buddha, this king feels that he enjoys a privileged position to give alms to the Buddha and his followers, since he has cared for them from the time before they even renounced the world. He therefore decides that, for the rest of his life, he alone will provide them with their requisites and will not

allow others a chance to give them gifts.

To this end, he constructs a sort of tunnel built of fences draped with cloth, which extends from the gates of the monastery to his palace in Rajageha. The king has this tunnel decorated with garlands, flowers, fragrances, and carpets. Whenever it is time for their alms round, the Buddha and his monks pass through this tunnel to the king's palace to take their meals. They then return to their monastery unseen and unapproached by others. This goes on for more than seven years.

The citizens eventually become angry that they have no access to the Buddha and begin to complain:

Now it has been more than seven years and seven days since the arrival of the Buddha among us, and we have not been allowed even to see him, much less to give alms, perform worship, or hear the *Dhamma*. The king alone serves him. But the Teacher comes into the existence for the sake of benefiting the whole world, including the gods. Moreover, hell is not hot just for the king, nor is it exactly a blue-lotus pond for the rest of us. So let us tell the king that if he gives us the Buddha, then it will be all right. But if he does not give [us the Buddha], then, having made war on the king, we will perform meritorious deeds such as giving alms to the *saṅgha*.²

Without a chance to make merit, the people fear that they will wind up in hell. Realizing that they can do little without the help of the general of the army, they approach him to get his support. The general agrees to make war on the king if necessary, but insists that once they have wrested the Buddha from the king, the first opportunity to give alms should go to him.

The citizens thus declare war on King Bandhumā. The king tries various tactics to avoid handing over the Buddha to them, first telling the general to let the people make war on him because the army will defend him. The general has to remind him that the army is itself composed of the citizens. What follows is a humorous exchange between the king and the people in which the king is made to realize that his very ability to give alms to the Buddha depends upon the people's support through taxation. The king asks the citizens if they would ever be able to afford the largesse to shower on the monks that he has been giving. The people respond wryly that "whatever (wealth) Your Majesty has is because of us. So, yes, we are able."³ At this, the king gives up and, weeping, agrees to hand over the Buddha. He goes to the Buddha and, wiping his tears away with the back of his hand, tells the Buddha that he had wanted to serve all the monks for his entire lifetime and never give others a chance. But because the people are angry with him, he will now permit them to give alms. He asks the Buddha to show favor on the people and accept their alms from now on. The general then prepares his first gift.

I would like to leave the story here and ask: why is gift-giving of such importance that the people are willing to make war over it?⁴ Why is the opportunity to give a gift a matter of so much competition and contestation? At one level, the citizens themselves tell us the reason: gift-giving is their primary means of making merit and assuring themselves a good afterlife, either in heaven or in a desirable rebirth as a human. Indeed, Theravāda Buddhist literature emphasizes that gift-giving is in fact the chief means whereby the laity can make merit. The very word for “lay person” in Theravāda Buddhist countries is often simply “giver” (*dāyaka*). The anthropological literature demonstrates the importance of merit-making as well; Melford Spiro shows the extent to which such giving is taken seriously by lay people in Burmese villages—so much so that people even keep account books of the merit that they earn by gift-giving (Spiro 1982, 111–112). Keeping track of all the gifts that they give and the merit that their gifts earn allows them to calculate that the meritorious deeds will be sure to outweigh the demerits that they acquire by their wrong actions.

While such a teleological understanding of gift-giving as essentially a merit-making practice is found throughout the literature on Theravāda Buddhism in both primary sources and secondary scholarship, I would like to turn here to a somewhat different way of approaching the entire topic of the gift. My question, then, will be to ask to what extent is the logic of the gift based upon a teleological or prudential moral reasoning wherein the basis for moral action is the expectation of future reward. Is the gift always given out of self-interest? Are discussions of Buddhist *dāna* and the power struggles that surround it concerned only with its benefits, its rewards, its returns for the giver? Is the gift, and the extensive discursive and narrative treatment of it in the Buddhist sources, only about merit-making?

In order to begin to answer these questions, it is useful to turn to a range of medieval Theravāda discussions of the gift and, in addition, consider the Pāli sources within a larger framework of Hindu and Jain medieval texts as well. These discussions focus on the gift-giving encounter as a way to reflect critically upon a range of motivations and intentions that are ideally operative in moral action. Their scrutiny of the gift as a site for thinking about ethics is the focus of this paper.

Some general remarks about the nature of the South Asian gift (*dāna* in both Sanskrit and Pāli) and the discourses in which it was discussed are in order. *Dāna* is a topic that was often mentioned in the Pāli canon and its commentaries, but it was not until the medieval period, roughly beginning in the tenth century, that there was a large-scale effort to systematize and theorize the topic of the gift. At this time monks in Sri Lanka were engaged in writing anthologies, compendia, or summaries of lay practice; there are many treatises

that discuss at length *dāna* as one of the central duties of the laity. These sources typically quote from earlier canonical and commentarial literature, but work these earlier sources into a systematic whole in what is meant to be a practical, though perhaps somewhat idealized, guide to lay conduct. Through time, these handbooks came to have wide-scale application in the teaching and training of monks, even coming at times to supercede the study of the canonical sources themselves (von Hinüber 1996, 177).

What is intriguing is that similar processes were going on in India at just this time in both Jain and Hindu textual production. Jains wrote even more prolifically than did the Buddhists on topics of lay behavior in a genre that schematized and theorized the gift as one topic of several that form the central duties of Jain lay practice. Jain monks such as Hemacandra in the twelfth century came to have great influence at the court of the Caulukya king Kumārapāla (in what is now Gujarat), and his treatise on lay conduct (*śrāvakācāra*) was very influential in the Śvetāmbara Jain community up to the present day. Other important authors of Jain *śrāvakācāras* that treat *dāna* extensively were Devendrasūri and Siddhasenagaṇin. Hindu Dharmaśāstra writers across north and central India were also turning to the gift in the form of vast treatises or digests on the topic of *dāna* that codified, organized, and theorized the rules, values, and ideals of gift-giving. These Hindu Dharmaśāstra treatises were often written or commissioned by kings who were composing these vast digests to rearticulate and reinvigorate traditional Brahmanical values, perhaps as a response to cultural challenges posed by the presence of Islam. Dharmaśāstra anthologists such as King Ballālasena, author of the *Dānasāgara*, and the minister Hemādri, compiler of a thousand page volume on *dāna* in his *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*, gathered textual material on *dāna* from previous sources, that is, earlier Dharmaśāstra texts such as *Manu*, but also the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyana*, and the *Purāṇas*, in order to systematize Brahmanical thinking on the gift.

Very little of this textual material has been translated into any modern language, nor has its existence received much more than passing notice in modern scholarship. This neglect is regrettable, since in many ways these medieval texts can be considered the most extensive theorizing on the gift from premodern South Asia that we have. Moreover, what emerges when looking at the gift literature from these three traditions from the same period is suggestive of a shared, or translocal, discourse on the gift. It is worth considering these sources together, not in order to get at a single, or monolithic, truth of the South Asian gift, but rather to be able to trace out the continuities and discontinuities of their reflections on the gift. Reading horizontally—that is, across traditions and regions in the same time period in South Asia—helps us to complicate, and thereby enrich, our understanding of medieval religious identity, and to

begin to trace out the circulation of elite intellectual cultures in this period in South Asian history.

Though the Jain and Hindu texts are in Sanskrit and the Theravāda material is in Pāli, they use many of the same categories and idioms to talk about the gift. The Theravāda, Jain, and Hindu Dharmasāstra texts are all compendia or summaries, together with some commentary, that attempt to systematize previous more scattered references to the gift. They share common features of scholarly convention particular to the medieval period. The texts are all scissors-and-paste anthologies from previous canonical and commentarial sources that rearrange earlier passages under given topics to formulate a coherent and systematized *dāna* theory. In this they are engaged in a project of retrieving authority from the past and re-presenting it for the present and the future—generating something new out of something old. The production of similar gift discourses is suggestive of transregional cultural networks, where the methods and technologies of both Sanskrit and Pāli scholasticism may have developed mutually influencing one another. The authors are preoccupied with lists and extensive classification, which are presented as exhaustive theory and knowledge on the topic.

In content as well as in form, these texts are in many ways comparable. They all discuss the ideal qualities and virtues of the giver, the recipient, and the material gift. They are all interested in the appropriate ritual etiquette of the gift transaction. And they all share the following two important presuppositions about the gift that set the South Asian *dāna* apart from other kinds of gift-giving ideologies.

First, *dāna* is supposed to be disinterested in the sense that the giver should expect nothing from the recipient in return for the gift. *Dāna* is unusual in this regard among gift-giving practices studied cross culturally, in that it is conceived to be an unreciprocated, one-way transaction. Marcel Mauss in his classic *Essai sur le don*, argued that gift-giving exchanges were just that, *exchanges*, wherein social order is preserved by the values of reciprocity and “give-and-take.” However, even Mauss noticed that such values do not prevail in South Asian *dāna* ideologies and that *dāna* forms something of an exception to the general rule. To be sure, givers of *dāna* expect that their gifts will be religiously repaid in the form of spiritual or heavenly merit, in terms of good karma, but they expect no counter-gift or material recompense from the recipient. Monks, nuns, and Brahmans are not expected to make any return for their support whatsoever, even in the form of gratitude or thanks.

A second feature of the South Asian *dāna* is that it is ideally given to a fit and deserving recipient, described as a “worthy vessel” (*supātra*). Indeed, the more pure and worthy the recipient is, the more spiritual merit is earned for the giver. *Dāna* is a lay practice where those who themselves do not live out the

religious vocation can still be pious and religious by supporting those that do. In the case of Dharmaśāstra, the ideal recipient is the Brahman or the ascetic; in the case of Jains and Theravāda Buddhists, monks and nuns are the worthiest vessels of gifts. What is critical is that the giver's merit increases in proportion to the moral and religious status of the recipient. One important implication of the doctrine of the worthy recipient is that *dāna*, strictly understood, does not usually denote charity in the sense of giving to the poor or needy; it is not need-based, but rather merit-based giving, as it were.

These two basic features—the one-way, nonreciprocated character of the gift, and the fact that the gift is ideally given to one's moral and religious superiors—led in all the sources to distinctive patterns in characterizing the gift interaction. There is a structural inequality and lack of mutuality in the gift encounter that has important implications in understanding what the appropriate motivations and intentions should be when one is making a gift.

The medieval theorists all scrutinize the responses and the responsibilities that arise in the gift encounter. They ask, when a Brahman or a monk comes to the door in search of alms: what should be the appropriate intentions and motivations of the giver in making the gift? What should his or her virtues, character, and dispositions be while giving? What are the ideal virtues and qualities of a worthy recipient? What is the correct ritual procedure for *dāna*? How does the ritual act make the correct responses and intentions possible? This scrutiny of the encounter and the prescriptive moral systems that emerge from it suggest that the gift is being described as primarily an ethical category. It describes a face-to-face encounter that can be a site for idealizing and formalizing certain social relationships and interactions. It also gives us another angle for thinking about South Asian religious ethics, one that does not rely upon analysis of the well-traveled categories of *dharma* and karma.

This is moral reflection based on the face-to-face hospitality encounter. As one of the Dharmaśāstra texts states: “whenever knowledgeable Brahmans, who are pious, austere, intent upon truth and restraint, who practice meditation, and are in control of their senses, arrive, they purify on sight. What more when there is an alliance with them! Upon getting an opportunity to give to them and their acceptance a gift, one goes to the highest realm.”⁵ Here, the presence of and contact with admired others are purifying. It will be recalled that in the Theravāda story with which I began this paper, one of the principle grievances of the citizens was that they were not permitted to see the Buddha, nor to have access to or make contact with him. King Bandhumā forbade giving to the Buddha by keeping the citizens physically and visually apart from him.

From the point of view of *dāna* theory itself, the entire ethical structure of religious giving depends upon the superiority of the worthy recipient. The medieval theorists preferred to conceive of *dāna* as a way of offering tribute,

an act of veneration or homage to the monk or the Brahman. Giving a gift is making contact with an admired religious figure. *Dāna* is sometimes described along the same model as worship (*pūjā*) and is a one-way transaction to a Brahman or monastic that in some ways is analogous to worship offered to a deity. As in worship, the intentions of the one making the offerings are scrutinized: what are the appropriate motivations, dispositions, and intentions of someone making an offering?

In thinking about ethics by beginning with the gift encounter we move into questions that have occupied ethicists from Western philosophical traditions, that is, problems of intentionality, questions about the possibility of disinterested benevolence, and virtue ethics. But the gift also lets us think about ethics in a more context-sensitive manner; it gives us a way of analyzing moral values within a certain well-defined sphere of human activity. Scholars such as A. K. Ramanujan have argued that Indian ethics is noted for its “context-sensitive” approach to morality, preferring to make concrete moral injunctions about particular circumstances over grand, universalizing claims or imperatives (Ramanujan 1989). The face-to-face gift encounter lets us ask some of the same questions that have occupied moral philosophers in the West, but does so within a particularly South Asian framework.

What, then, are the ideal virtues and intentions of one offering a gift? The texts provide various lists and discussions that describe the appropriate virtues of a giver. Some of these are virtues, such as being moral, learned, honest in acquiring wealth, pure, and righteous. Others are lists that rank the various motivations that one might have in giving a gift, such as a standard Dharmaśāstra listing: one gives being motivated by *dharma*, by [self]-interest, passion, shame, happiness, and fear.⁶ Other features of an ideal giver get at something more like attitudes or dispositions that are neither enduring virtues nor simple motivations, such as the giving out of esteem or devotion, or simply having a pure desire to give.

A Jain list of celebrated qualities in the giver says that the giver should lack ill-will (*anasūyā*) toward the recipient, lack sorrow at [parting with] the gift, lack contempt (or condescension) [for the recipient], be joyful in wanting to give, while giving and after having given, have good intentions, disregard worldly reward, lack deception, and lack motive.⁷ Another list of virtues formulated by the Jains was a standard list of seven qualities of a giver (*dātṛguṇa*): esteem (*śraddhā*), devotion, contentment, zeal, discrimination, disinterestedness, and forbearance or patience (Williams 1963, 153).

The Theravāda sources get at the virtues of the giver in a variety of ways. The *Suttasaṅgahaṭṭhakathā*, following the story about King Bandhumā, elaborates on the five gifts of a good person (*sappurusadāna*): good people give with esteem *śraddhā* (*saddhā*), with due honor, in a timely fashion, with a

mind that holds nothing back, and without reducing the gift.⁸ Another list says that a good person gives with due honor, intentionally (*cittikatvā*), with his own hand, does not give discards, and gives whenever a guest approaches.⁹ These lists emphasize the importance of honoring respected guests face-to-face by means of generosity.

One particular virtue or disposition that has been mentioned in many of these lists and is discussed at great length by all the sources warrants further discussion. It is mentioned so frequently in these gift discourses that it seems to have been a shared pan-Indic religious value associated with gift-giving and holds an important key for understanding much of how South Asian gift theories work. This is the quality of *śraddhā* (Pāli, *saddhā*), a term not easily rendered into English, but which I have been translating as “esteem.” Although *śraddhā* is often translated by scholars as faith or confidence, in the sense of faith in religious doctrine or teachers, it is not clear what this sense of the term could have in the gift relationship.¹⁰ Instead, on the basis of these textual sources and drawing on the suggestions of other scholars, I argue that the term *śraddhā*, when used in the context of giving and hospitality, suggests a kind of unquestioning, non-judging esteem on the part of the giver toward the recipient of the gift.

Stephanie Jamison has argued that *śraddhā* refers to the “unquestioning hospitality” owed to guests and strangers who appear at the door and is a central obligation of Vedic and post-Vedic social life (1996, 178). Paul Hacker has suggested that in gift-giving contexts, *śraddhā* is often glossed by the term for lack of spite, ill will, or envy (*anasīyā*), which suggests that *śraddhā* is a feeling of genuine good will toward the recipient (1963, 187). The giver abstains from pointing out the weaknesses of the recipient and attempts to see only the recipient’s virtuous qualities. He or she is not begrudging toward the recipient, nor jealous nor envious of the recipient. When these negative feelings are absent, one is filled with delight, even zeal, in giving.

The medieval authors also define *śraddhā* in this way: one should give out of high regard for the recipient and avoid spite, where spite is defined as “uncovering faults where there is virtue.”¹¹ *Śraddhā* is defined as “when someone is full of good will and is cheerful and so on at the sight of recipients and is welcoming and unbegrudging.”¹² The giver should never give out of contempt toward the recipient. One should look only at the good qualities in the worthy recipient and not judge or question his or her virtue. To be sure, such regard is only possible once the recipient is already identified as a worthy recipient, that is, belonging to the class of religious persons that these traditions have taken such care to identify. But once one sees that it is a monk or nun or Brahman standing at the door for alms, this quality of unquestioning, unbegrudging, joyful esteem should well up in the giver.

It is this insistence on placing high moral value on the respect for admirable persons that I am calling “an ethics of esteem.” To esteem someone is to set high value on him or her, to appraise such a person well, and to place him or her in high regard. It is a moral view that values demarcating difference, recognizing moral and religious superiority in others, and responding appropriately, as the very conditions for moral action. The capacity to feel esteem for the other requires one to recognize the values of the traditions that the religious person represents. It calls forth a response and a responsibility to honor those values in the form of generosity.

We can now begin to see why the emphasis on the status of the recipient is so essential to these gift theories. The moral excellence of the recipient is vital not only for how much merit or good karma the giver earns by the gift, but it also conditions the appropriate intentions and responses expected of the giver. A giver can only feel esteem when face-to-face with an admired other. The successful gift depends upon the giver recognizing moral worth in the recipient and responding to it. In this regard, the medieval theorists were interested in how the presence of exalted others conditions moral agency.

Why is esteem a morally valuable disposition? I wish to argue that the medieval authors viewed the experience of esteem as doing several things: first, esteem requires the recognition of moral excellence where it appears in the world. It is an act of discrimination—of seeing good qualities in the other—that is a kind of religious act, a mark of piety. It involves a noting of difference, of recognizing the moral gap between one’s self and the other, which itself can be a call to moral excellence. Second, the texts connect esteem to a zeal or eagerness to give; esteem and admiration produce pleasure and spontaneity. This introduces pleasure and happiness as resources for being moral.

The medieval authors take great pains to describe the pleasure of the gift encounter and the ways that esteem is a call to goodness. Unlike certain Western traditions of duty-based ethics that find moral action attended by pleasure and happiness suspect, here we find moral action always attended by pleasure on the part of the agent. A passage from a Jain commentary illuminates the ideal gift:

The recipient is described as one possessing virtues and therefore there should be no ill-will on the part of the giver, which means that he possesses forbearance. With a pure mind [the giver thinks]: “I am fortunate that ascetics are entering my house.” There should be no anger [thinking]: “Every day they come looking for food and troubling us.” He should not experience sorrow at parting with a gift such as food. Sorrow means depression, lacking esteem (*śraddhā*), by one [thinking]: “I gave too much, and it is useful in my own house.” [Instead,] when giving, he [should think] thus: “My posses-

sion is only useful for those who have taken vows.” [He should never feel] contempt, which would mean that he insults [the recipient]...: Giving with respect means with the arising of esteem (*śraddhā*) increasing for the recipient. The giver should want to give when seeing a monk or when a monk asks, and he should have supreme joy and even goose bumps. So also while giving and after having given, at these three times he gets goose bumps.¹³

These goose bumps, or the prickly flesh resulting from having one’s hair stand on end that one gets during moments of extreme excitation or happiness, are frequently encountered in the literature. One should thrill physically and mentally at the opportunity to make a gift to a deserving person. The gift involves an affective response, and one’s heart should swell with supreme delight at the opportunity to make a good gift. Sometimes in the Jain narrative literature, when a great gift is given, it is a cause for celebration. Often flowers rain down from the sky, people weep from their happiness, and shouts are heard: “Wonderful, a gift, a gift” (Balbir 1983, 149).

The Buddhist texts also break down the gift process into distinct moments of pleasure in a simple verse: “Before giving, one is happy, giving, one calms the mind, having given, one is pleased: these are the attainments of giving (sacrifice).”¹⁴ The act of giving works on the giver, bringing joy, calmness, and satisfaction. This verse and the commentaries on it identify three distinct moments of giving: before giving one is full of eager anticipation; during the gift, the act itself works on the mind to calm and soothe it since one is renouncing one’s attachment to the material object. Afterwards one should still retain pleasure by not regretting the gift. Additionally, the afterthought can bring pleasure by remembrance; remembering times past in which one gave, one reflects: “Wow, the custom of the wise has been followed by me, and it is excellent and good.”¹⁵

I believe that this emphasis on the happiness of the giver qualifies in an important way the teleological understanding of the gift with which we began. That is, these moments of happiness that giving brings introduce a different logic to the gift than one that is purely interested in reward or merit. Here, the gift is not something done only out of desire for an end other than itself. Rather the act of giving causes extreme joy and even goose bumps. The texts break down the time sequence of the gift process in order to examine the multiple good feelings that can arise: one’s regard for the recipient, one’s delight in having the good fortune to receive worthy recipients as guests, the process of making an offering, and one’s satisfaction when it is over knowing that one has done something good. This celebration of the “present” captures the mutual presence of morality and pleasure.

I would like to pause here briefly to reflect on some of the implications of

this ethics of esteem and this kind of generosity. Gifts to religious superiors that are based on one's esteem and regard for their moral excellence are deemed superior to gifts made out of compassion or pity to the poor, the downtrodden, the morally dubious, though such persons may in fact stake a greater claim to needing the financial support. In this regard, the medieval South Asian gift ideologies may hold more in common with the older meaning of the Latin *charitas* rather than the more narrowly defined and recent notions of charity. *Charitas* means to value as precious or dear, to put high value or price upon, and so worth, value, and esteem are essential to the sentiment (Smith 1979, 231). Charity has since come to mean, more narrowly, acts of donation to the poor, but Christian ideas of charity may preserve some of this original sense of recognizing high worth insofar as the Christian is expected to recognize moral excellence in the poor. Christian charity places a special moral worth on the poor since the poor, the needy, and the infirm are conceived to represent the very image of Christ.

But in South Asian gift discourses, the poor have no similar exalted status. In the logic of karma, where no bad deed goes unpunished over the course of many rebirths, the poor owe their unfortunate position to previous evil deeds (often interpreted as being stingy or miserly in a previous birth). Due to the laws of karma, poverty and wretchedness in this life indicate wrongdoing in a previous one. Thus there is little possibility of esteem in one's relationship to the poor beggar standing at the door for alms.

The texts do not discuss at length gifts to the poor, and when these gifts are mentioned, it seems that the authors are in some places discomfited by the subject. The texts generally allow that such giving brings in a little merit (although some authors state that it is completely fruitless), but not nearly as much as to a worthy recipient. One of the Dharmasāstra texts acknowledges that supporting the needy is permissible, even sometimes necessary, but does not want to call it *dāna* or giving gifts, properly speaking.¹⁶

Sometimes the texts suggest that it is only extraordinary people or saints that can give to the poor because they are moved by compassion, rather than religious merit like ordinary people. A Jain author, Hemacandra, argues that it is right to give to the

poor, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the sick, only out of pity, but not out of devotion... It is right to sow one's wealth out of compassion only on the very wretched, without discriminating between recipient and non-recipient and without considering [the recipient's] suitability or non-suitability.¹⁷

Compassion, but not devotion, is appropriate for the unfortunate. Moreo-

ver, Hemacandra qualifies this type of giving as the act of a “superior lay person” (*mahāśrāvaka*), the exceptional moral standard, suggesting that ordinary lay people will more readily give to esteemed others out of devotion than to the lowly out of compassion. Indeed, if we turn to the narrative literature from all of these traditions, when we see giving to the poor and wretched out of compassion, it is typically done by the Bodhisattva, the Tīrthankara, or other highly-achieved religious figures.

This kind of reasoning suggests a kind of moral empiricism or realism, where the authors are interested in what ordinary people are capable of accomplishing and how they are able to become moral agents. This realism comes out in the following discussion by a Jain author, Devendrasūri, which hints at what is really at stake in gifts to the needy. The author wants to draw a sharp distinction between giving out of pity or compassion, on the one hand, and giving out of esteem or devotion, on the other. He argues forcefully that one should never give to monks out of pity. In this scenario, one might give out of pity to monks or Brahmans supposing that they are not getting any alms, that they are filthy and rejected by their own people, hungry and without recourse, and so they are to be despised. In a world in which Jain monks are often prohibited by their vows from bathing and are enjoined to practice fasting, in which they wander as supplicants, it is not unlikely that some people would react to them with contempt. Devendrasūri, however, will have none of it and says that he “hates and censures” such an attitude.¹⁸ It is wrong because one gives without recognizing the virtues of the monks but instead despises them, which involves a kind of hatred that is called “censuring monks.”¹⁹ It is a violation of the ethics of esteem, which requires one to recognize only good qualities in the recipient and disregard the recipient’s failings or weaknesses.²⁰

Although this discussion is about monks, it is suggestive for what the medieval thinkers may have thought about compassion or pity more generally. Pity may not be far from contempt, and having pity for others may be akin to despising them at worst and patronizing them at best. Pity involves looking down upon, rather than up to, someone. Such feelings are not particularly ethically valuable. Gifts made out of devotion, esteem, and respect are loftier or at least more pleasing than gifts made out of pity because the feelings that they invoke in the giver are nobler; noble feelings are in turn conducive to creating moral agents. To be sure, there are other discourses in which compassion is valued quite highly in all three of these traditions. However, in these gift discourses we see it having to make way for esteem as valued moral disposition, and compassion is not the operative moral value.

Just as giving downwards is not highly valued in these discourses on *dāna*, so too are relationships of equality and mutuality disregarded. This is not an ethic that prizes equality and sameness as prerequisites for moral reasoning

and moral action. The ethics of esteem does not assume all human beings should be treated equally or are the same. What is meant by esteem is not the generalized respect that one should have for all persons. Philosophers sometimes distinguish between respect and esteem by noting that respect is owed to everyone in virtue of his or her being a human being, whereas esteem is reserved only for those who earn or are entitled to special regard. An ethics based on esteem assumes difference, hierarchy, and special classes of persons who are admired apart from others. The morally relevant response of esteem can arise only in a relationship of unequals, where the superior moral status of the recipient is assumed. From the point of view of studying comparative religious ethics, the ethics of esteem may present a considerable challenge from the standpoint of enlightenment ethics or modern Western values, where assumptions about impartiality, human equality, and fairness are the operative conditions for justice and moral action.

Resistance to a worldview based on hierarchy and difference should not lead us to dismiss it as a kind of ethics, however. There is a temptation to read these discourses *only* as apologias for Brahmanical or clerical hegemony, or rhetoric trying to legitimize and maintain a social hierarchy and to preserve material interests. To an extent, we must keep these critiques in mind: it may be that power and economic interest never go away. But we should not let our own distinctly postmodern predisposition to see everything in terms of power foreclose on the possibility that certain discourses might actually be expressing coherent ethical perspectives. What the medieval gift theories do remind us of is that often where the modern observer sees only relations of power or dominance, or economic interest, thoughtful voices from within the tradition have often chosen not to focus solely on these aspects of the gift in favor of considering the gift's moral dimensions.

From the point of view of the medieval theorists, the hierarchy and inequality of the South Asian gift relationship provides the conditions for religious and moral response. The exalted status of the recipient is the very condition for esteem and respect to rise up in the giver, and the moral life is predicated upon the presence of virtuous others. Indeed, part of what it may mean to *be* religious in South Asia is to esteem certain types of others. The ethics of esteem gives us a way to talk about ethics in a way that does not depend upon our own distinctively modern and Western values of human equality, sameness, and autonomy.

Thus, the problem that I first asked at the beginning of this paper—that is, whether or not the gift is interpreted only as a self-interested merit-making practice—is considerably more complicated when one looks at what South Asian intellectuals have historically thought about their gift-giving ideologies. While the medieval theorists do not deny that self-interest is operative in the

gift and that merit is sure to flow from it, they also see in the topic of the gift an opportunity to reflect upon moral questions and human social encounters. I believe that they saw in the gift not simply a calculating merit-making practice, but a moral and social order. What was at stake with the citizens being willing to declare war on King Bandhumā over access to the Buddha was not just their chance to make merit, but also to be moral and religious agents, which includes experiencing esteem. In a story that seems to center on power and competing interests, we still need to know about why the act of giving is so critical, and to do that we need to explore what sort of power lies in the gift encounter itself. Studying how the medieval authors theorized the ways in which face-to-face contact with others prompts moral and religious response gives us access to how moral ideologies shaped the prestige cultures of South Asia.

The theme of the gift is beginning to attract attention from scholars in a broad range of disciplines, including not just anthropology, but also sociology, philosophy, literary and critical theory, economics, and gender theory. As Mauss himself noted, the gift is inherently multivalent; studying the gift involves what he called “total social phenomena,” which are at once juridical, economic, moral, religious, political, and even aesthetic (Mauss 1990 [1925], 3). In the context of South Asia, the gift is certainly a topic upon which more textual study can be done and more theoretical attention paid to the nature of South Asian gift discourses. The gift is also a category that has considerable potential for comparative religious ethics. South Asian reflection on *dāna* shares affinities with the ethical reflection that can be seen developing in the West in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and his followers. Jacques Derrida’s recent tribute to Levinas (1997) and his own working through of what he calls an “ethics of welcome,” or hospitality, are very suggestive in light of what I have been considering here. By turning our attention to the face-to-face hospitality encounter and by thinking about how to articulate an ethics of welcome, as the medieval South Asian theorists did, we have before us a new avenue of thinking about critical ethical reflection in non-Western traditions.

End Notes

1. This story is the story of Sumanā as told in the *Suttasaṅgahaṭṭhakathā*, pp. 6–11, which the anthology takes from AA.ii.593f.

2. *Ajja satthu loke uppanassa sattamāsādhikāni sattaṣaṃccharāni, mayaṃ ca datthum pi na labhāma, pageva bhikkhaṃ vā dātuṃ pūjaṃ vā kātuṃ dhammaṃ vā sotuṃ. Rājā sayam eva upatthahati. Satthā ca uppajjamāno sadevakassa lokassa atthāya hitāya uppanne. Na hi rañño va nirayo uṇho, nāññesaṃ nīluppalavanasadiso. Tasmā rājānaṃ vadāma: sace no satthāraṃ deti, icc etaṃ kusalaṃ. Noce deti, rañño saddhiṃ yujjhivā pi saṅghadānādīni puññāni karomā ti* (*Suttasaṅgahaṭṭhakathā*, p. 7).

3. *Nanu amhe ye va nissāya devassa uppannanti vatvā sakkhissāmāti* (*Suttasaṅgahaṭṭhakathā*, p. 7).

4. This paper is based on a presentation entitled “Medieval Hindu Dharmaśāstra,

Jain, and Theravāda Reflections on the Gift,” in a panel on “The Gift” for the Religion of South Asia Section of the Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion in Boston, November 21, 1999. Some of the oral style of the original presentation has been retained.

5. *vidyāvantaś ca ye viprāḥ suvratāś ca tapasvinaḥ / satyasamyamasamyuktā dhyānavṛttā jitendriyāḥ / punanti darśanaṃ prāptāḥ kiṃ punaḥ saṅgatiṃ gatāḥ / teṣāṃ dattvā ca bhuktvā ca prāpnuyuh paramāṃ gatim* (*Dānasāgara*, p. 17, verse 20).

6. These are the six *adhiṣṭhāna*, bases from which one is said to give *dāna*: *dharmam arthaṃ ca kāmāṃ ca vrīḍāharṣabhayāni ca / adhiṣṭhānāni dānānāṃ ṣaḍ etāni pracakṣate* (*Dānasāgara*, p. 28, verse 4; *Dānakāṇḍa* of the *Kṛtyakalpataru*, pp. 5–6; *Dānakhaṇḍa* of the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*, p. 14).

7. *dātṛviśeṣaḥ pratigrahītaryanasūyā tyāge 'viśādaḥ aparibhāvitā ditsato dadato dattvataśca prītiyogāḥ kuśalābhisandhitā dṛṣṭaphalānapekṣitā nirupadhatvam anidānatvam iti* (Siddhasenagaṇin’s commentary on the *Tattvārthasūtra*, p. 120).

8. *Pañc'imāni bhikkhave sappurisdānāni. Katamāni pañca? Saddhāya dānam deti, sakkaccaṃ dānaṃ deti, kālena dānaṃ deti, anaggahitacitto dānaṃ deti, attānaṃ ca paraṃ ca anupahacca dānaṃ deti* (*Upāsakajanālaṅkāra*, pp. 295–296; *Suttasaṅgahaṭṭhakathā*, p. 11; taken from A.iii.172f.).

9. *Pañc'imāni bhikkhave, sappurisdānāni. Katamāni pañca? Sakkaccaṃ deti, cittikatvā deti, sahatthā deti, anapaviddhaṃ deti, āgamanadiṭṭhiko deti* (*Upāsakajanālaṅkāra*, p. 295 from A.iii.172f.).

10. There has been considerable philological and scholarly attention to the concept of *śraddhā* in both Brahmanical and Buddhist scholarship. See Benveniste 1973, Carter 1993: 105–114, Dhammapala 1984, Hacker 1963, Hara 1964, Jamison 1996, 176–184, Köhler 1973, Ludowyk–Gyomroi 1947, Nanayakkara 1984, Saddhatissa 1978, and Smith 1979, 53–68.

11. *asūyā ca guṇe doṣāviṣkāraḥ* (*Dānasāgara*, p. 30).

12. *Saumukhyādyabhisamprītir arthināṃ darśane yadā / satkṛtiś cānasūyā ca tadā śraddheti kīrtyate* (*Dānasāgara*, p. 29, verse 15; *Dānakāṇḍa* of the *Kṛtyakalpataru*, p. 6; *Dānakhaṇḍa* of the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*, p. 15).

13. *pratigrahītā guṇasampanno vakṣyamāṇaḥ tatrānasūyā kṣamāvattvam / prasannacittatā puṇyavān ahaṃ yasya me geham anuvisanti tapasvinaḥ / na tvakṣamā kāryā, pratidivasam ete mṛgayante nirveditāḥ khalv amībhir vayam iti / tyāge na viśīdati / datte 'nnādāvaviśādaḥ / viśādo viṣaṇṇatā śraddhāhrāso 'tidattaṃ mayeti / gṛhe 'pi cintanīyam eva prayojanam iti, dattvaivaṃ cintanīyam idam evaikaṃ mama svam yad vratinām upayuktam iti / tathā paribhāvitā paribhavati... pratigrahītur vardhamānaśraddhāprāpitenādareṇa dānam / ditsata ityādi /sādhudarśane yācane vā dātum icchataḥ paramayā prītyāprahrṣṭatayā yogāḥ / evaṃ ca dadato dattavataś ca kālatraye 'pi praharṣayogaḥ* (Siddhasenagaṇin’s commentary on the *Tattvārthasūtra*, p. 120)..

14. *pubb' eva dānā sumano /dadaṃ cittam pasādaye / datvā attamano hoti: / eṣā yaññassa sampadā* (A.iii.337, quoted in *Upāsakajanālaṅkāra*, p. 293, *Sāratthasamuccaya*, p. 84, and *Maṅgalatthadīpanī*, p. 7).

15. *pañḍitappaññattaṃ nāma mayā anuṭṭhitam aho sādhu suṭṭhūti* (*Maṅgalatthadīpanī*, p. 10).

16. *Dānasāgara*, p. 28.

17. *kiṃ tv atidīneṣv api niḥsvāndhabadhirapaṅgurogārtaprabhṛtiṣu kṛpayā kevalayā dhanam vapan, na tu bhaktyā / bhaktipūrvakaṃ hi saptakṣetryāṃ yathocitaṃ dānam / atidīneṣu tv avicāritapātrāpātram avimṛṣṭakalpanīyākalpanīyaparakāram kevalayaiva*

karuṇayā svadhanasya vapanam nyāyāyā (*Yogaśāstra* with *Svopajñavṛtti*, p. 576).

18. The Prakrit verse reads: *suhiesu ya duhiesu ya jā me assamjāesu anukampā / rāgena va doseṇa va taṃ ninde taṃ ca gaṛihāmi* (*Śrāddhadinakṛtya* with *Svopajñavṛtti*, I. p. 134).

19. The Sanskrit commentary: *na guṇavattabuddhyā, tathā dveṣeṇa, dveṣo 'tra sādhanindākhyah* (*Śrāddhadinakṛtya* with *Svopajñavṛtti*, I. p. 134).

20. Compare to Paul Camenisch (“Gift and Gratitude in Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1981: 9.1, p. 14): If unworthiness is “the donor’s assessment of the recipient, then the gift would seem to be an act of condescension, subjugation, even of humiliation, rather than a gift in the more positive sense.”

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