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ABSTRACT

Scholarly studies of Buddhist gift-giving have explored the many ways in which gifts are or are not reciprocal. This topic is revisited in this article by the author drawing greater attention to the practice of narration. Instead of understanding Buddhist words about *dāna* as representing religious doctrines or the experience of its social practice, the author considers how Buddhists narrate *dāna* as a means of maintaining relationships with self and others. Examining narratives of one monastic gift-recipient, meanings of *dāna* and moral principles of gift-giving are shown to vary alongside shifting relations between givers and receivers. This case suggests that themes of reciprocity are most salient when narrators grapple with interpersonal threats. Offering possible interpretations of this correlation, the author argues how reciprocal forces could be external social conditions to which narratives respond as well as created *ex nihilo* through the practice of narration as a strategy of ordering interpersonal conflicts potentially unrelated to reciprocity.

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Introduction

> Two figures stand facing one another in a dimly lit entrance way of a home at the outskirts of Yangon, Myanmar. One, a layman, carefully extends an envelope filled with cash to the other, a Buddhist monk. After placing the envelope in his shoulder bag, the monk mutters a few Pāli stanzas. The layman maintains a reverential posture until the monks' words come to an end. With an exchange of smiles, the monk exits. (Event witnessed and recorded by the author on 21 June 2007)

For those familiar with Buddhist practices or social life in Myanmar, this transaction is easily recognized as alms-giving (*dāna* in Pāli or *a-lhū-dān* in Burmese).[1] *Dāna* is the most frequently occurring and readily observable religious activity in Myanmar, a predominantly Theravāda Buddhist country. Its practice is regarded as the central pillar of lay religious life and yields the material resources that make monasticism possible.

Dāna has long fascinated theorists of the gift. In his *Essai sur le don*, Marcel Mauss famously postulated that *dāna* is an exception to his general

CONTACT Charles Carstens carstens@fas.harvard.edu

principles of gift-giving. According to Mauss's thesis, the gift is apparently disinterested, but in actuality obligates its recipient to reciprocate, which sustains exchange relationships and broader societal cohesion. In contrast, South Asian theories of the gift portray monastic recipients of *dāna* as abstaining from reciprocal actions and as free from gift obligations, thereby undermining cycles of exchange and its reinforcement of social bonds (Mauss 2002, 179).[2]

Scholars of South Asian literature have affirmed and elaborated Mauss's reading of South Asian gifts.[3] However, since these textual accounts represent *idealized practices* of gift-giving, they cannot be presumed accurately to document or reflect the actual historical practice of *dāna*. In fact, it could be argued that *dāna* was meaningfully theorized in defiance of gift-obligations, thus implying social practices of reciprocity.[4] The applicability of Mauss's insights thus remains an open question for the historical practice of Buddhist gift-giving.

Anthropologists of Buddhism have considered the place of such textual models among contemporary Buddhists. If strictly defined as a transfer of material goods, reciprocity is reportedly absent between lay givers and monastic receivers of *dāna*. However, indirect mechanisms of reciprocity have been discerned through the ways Buddhists speak about *dāna*. For instance, when prompted to explain motivations of giving, Buddhists routinely point to the rewards of good karma, the cultivation of generosity, and even prestige from the conspicuous display of moral virtue. These benefits are not cast as a form of monastic reciprocation because they are precipitated by the lay action of giving. Playing no active role in conferring benefits, monks are characterized as conditions for exchange.[5] Similarly, monastic services of preaching and performing ritual services have been interpreted as a form of delayed returns—non-material reciprocation that occurs at the scale of the greater community and not between individuals.[6] The contributions to the special issue of *Religion Compass* on "Comparative Anthropology of Buddhist Transactions", published in 2015 (see Sihlé 2015), have reinvigorated the discussion of Theravāda Buddhist gift-exchanges, calling for a comparative anthropology of Buddhist gifts. Buddhist gifts are reexamined in contexts expanded well beyond monastic–lay transactions and the authors introduce analytical terminology which is more precise than the broad differentiation between gifts and economic exchange.[7]

Both the received scholarship and this new direction formulate social theories of Buddhist gift-giving derived from observations of the direct performance of *dāna* and, more frequently, its articulation by Buddhists. Buddhist words are often presumed to *represent* understandings or experiences of *dāna*. Representation is certainly one possible objective of the narration of *dāna*, especially when prompted by questions such as 'Why

give *dāna*?'. In fields beyond Buddhist studies, anthropologists have drawn increasing attention to the way narratives accomplish more than mere representation. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps show how narration—or storytelling—orders, coheres, and makes meaningful experiences and social lives (Ochs and Capps 2001, 45). Michael Jackson cogently demonstrates how storytelling can restore agency and remedy intersubjective disturbances (Jackson 2002, 30). Jarret Zigon (2007) casts narration as a moral activity that not only alleviates the stress of interpersonal relationships, but also helps us return to everyday moral life with ourselves and others.

Recognizing the potential for narratives to reconcile interpersonal tension and for gift obligations to be a source of such tension (Mauss's contention), I consider the possibility that the very narration of *dāna* is already implicated in and responds to social conditions tied to the gift. In other words, Buddhist words about *dāna* are less unmediated expressions of Buddhist doctrinal principles or social realities of gift-giving than versatile interventions in the ever-fluctuating circumstances of a gift-exchange relationship.[8] In this article, I examine three accounts of *dāna* articulated by one monastic in the course of a long-term lay–monastic patronage relationship. I explore the way *dāna* is narrated as well as possible conditions relevant to narrative choices.[9] Each narrative is read according to the narrator's *intersubjective context*. By this term I mean the ways in which the monk narrates *dāna* with an awareness of his relationships with others and as a means of changing, maintaining or coping with those relationships. These 'others' include his audience (myself) and those featured in his narrative (his donors and himself).[10]

I argue that the meanings and significance of *dāna* are fluid across these narratives, taking shape through distinct moral principles of gift-giving that govern each—hospitality, the Burmese concept of *anade*, and benefactor–beneficiary relations. Themes of reciprocity were not expressed consistently. This observation cannot speak to the question of whether and when Buddhists *experience dāna* as a gift with obligations of reciprocity. Rather, it invites reflection on the circumstances in which Buddhists *make dāna* into particular kinds of gifts through narrative. Mauss's notion of the gift offers a framework for imagining how gifts could affect intersubjective contexts and how *dāna* narratives respond to dissonance in interpersonal relations. In this case, reciprocity was most salient in narratives when the narrator anticipated his incapacity to reciprocate. *Dāna* narratives could thus become more reciprocal in conditions of exchange failure, voicing an experience of intensified gift pressures. Conversely, *dāna* could be narrated in ways *other than reciprocal* when gift-exchange is unhindered, where gift-pressures are present, but latent. Yet, gift obligations need not be the only form of

disruption to which *dāna* narratives respond. Narratives with strong themes of reciprocity could even serve as a means of conceptualizing and navigating interpersonal distress originally unrelated to gift obligations. In other words, narration of gift reciprocity could be a strategy for transforming an irresolvable non-gift problem into a resolvable gift problem.

Hospitality

A week prior to the event of *dāna* sketched in the introduction, the monastic recipient U Sopaka arrived in Yangon with plans to visit his lay giver Tun.[11] U Sopaka invited me to accompany him for his third and final visit. We reached Tun's home in the mid-afternoon. Tun welcomed U Sopaka with prostration while I received a warm handshake. We were led inside and seated —U Sopaka on a high chair and myself on a couch. Settling on the floor, Tun politely inquired about our bus journey and my general experience of living in Myanmar. Meanwhile, a woman named May—whom U Sopaka addressed as 'Mother'—set out cold beverages and snacks, quietly but urgently gesturing me to eat. Over the course of the afternoon, initial formalities eased into raucous laughter and teasing. Discussion leapt from one topic to another: the weather, food, health problems, local gossip, and Premier League football predictions. As our visit drew to a close, U Sopaka received Tun's envelope in the manner outlined above.

On the bus back to Yangon, U Sopaka recounted the events of the afternoon: our reception, what was served, and notable points of discussion. When asked how this visit compared with others, he specified variations in the refreshments, topics of conversation, and those in attendance. *Dāna* was not mentioned. Uncertain whether I correctly understood what had been given by Tun, I asked about the envelope. U Sopaka replied: "A donation [*dāna*]. I sometimes receive one when I visit." Recalling him calling May 'Mother', I asked U Sopaka whether she was his actual mother and this his actual family. He explained: "No, my family is very far from here. May loves me like a son and she is a like a mother to me."[12]

U Sopaka then recounted his history with Tun and May. He first encountered Tun while stopping at his house on an alms-round (collecting *dāna*) as a novice at the age of nine. As alms appearances became routine and U Sopaka's face became familiar, Tun took an interest in the young novice's career. When U Sopaka reached the eligible age for higher ordination, Tun eagerly volunteered to be his sponsor.[13] A higher ordination is no modest undertaking. These very elaborate events involve ornate costumes, grand processions, and scores of participants. Costs are not covered by the monastic candidate, but by a voluntary lay sponsor, often a wealthy local or a senior family member. Sponsors are responsible for not

only defraying the cost of the ritual, but also committing themselves to be the monk's primary patron. In accepting this position, the sponsor receives the prestigious title *rahan' dakā* and pledges to maintain responsibility for the monk's future needs.[14] The monk is then permitted to request assistance whenever in need. Considering the magnitude of the financial burden, ordination sponsorship is held in great esteem and is often among the most significant religious deeds in the life of a lay Buddhist.[15]

Every monk has at least one principal patron.[16] Tun was U Sopaka's original principal patron and May became his second. May is not formally a member of Tun's family, but a neighboring widow who is friendly with Tun's family. May's ascension to the role of principal patron did not displace Tun. Rather, they shared the responsibility for all major financial investments in U Sopaka's career. Through consistent acts of support and the development of mutual affection, Tun and May came to resemble a second family. In fact, out of appreciation for their caregiving, U Sopaka's biological family grew close to Tun and May.[17] After completing schooling in Yangon, U Sopaka was offered the opportunity to continue his studies elsewhere. Proud of his accomplishments and encouraging his progress, Tun and May assured him that they would support him from afar. U Sopaka lived a great distance from his supporters and could not visit frequently. Nevertheless, he managed to visit two to three times annually, the above account being one such visit.

U Sopaka's words on the bus formulate two distinct visions of *dāna*. While relating his sponsor history, he remembers *dāna* as both the original cause and the means of developing their relationship. Tun's sponsorship of higher ordination not only embodies a major act of giving, but also signifies a formal commitment to a long-term gift-giving relationship. Here, *dāna* stands as the foundation of as well as what sustains their relationship. The second vision of *dāna* is expressed in U Sopaka's account of the afternoon's 'visit', which consists of a list of its exceptional features. This list is meaningful within the narrative structure of formalized performances of hospitality. U Sopaka and I are guests and his donors the hosts. U Sopaka lingers over his hosts' subtle acts of generosity. Recounting the refreshments, he mentions that he was offered his favorite drink, joking that they must have observed the enthusiasm with which he drank the same beverage in the past. U Sopaka points out that they even inconvenienced themselves to provide snacks that foreigners might enjoy. By carefully noticing these details, fondly remembering Tun and May as excellent hosts, and eagerly sharing this memory with others, U Sopaka expertly performs his role as guest. Here, the narration is not an ethical strategy deployed in the face of interpersonal stress, but an act of care made meaningful within the context of hospitality. By narrating this to me (as someone unrefined in the practice of hospitality), U Sopaka invites my

participation in this moral practice, helping me successfully embody the proper role of guest.

Scholarly representations of *dāna* are typically delimited by the boundaries of the ritual's performance, much like the vignette that opens the introduction. Since *dāna* is a formal ritual, I expected its performance to be marked by boundaries, differentiating it from the preceding non-ritual space and time. However, according to my observations, *dāna* did not interrupt the tone of informality nor did our hosts deviate from their performance of hospitality. *Dāna* had no place in U Sopaka's account until specifically prompted by my query. *Dāna* appeared to fold seamlessly into the events of the afternoon, embedded within the ritualized practice of hospitality. The roles of monastic and layman were obscured by those of host and guest. While this representation contrasts with standard doctrinal or theorized representations of *dāna*, it certainly does not depart from Buddhist notions of the gift. Mastery of hospitality is modeled and celebrated throughout Buddhist literature and even appears in discussions of *dāna*.[18] This occasion thus illustrates that *dāna* is not restricted to its own formal independent ritual space, but can fall comfortably within the domain of hospitality—a regular practice of lay Buddhist morality.

Anade

Approximately a year after receiving the envelope full of cash, U Sopaka began to voice doubts about his future monasticism. He spoke not of the causes of his dissatisfaction but of the potential adverse reactions from others:[19]

> The moment I think about disrobing, I see my donors, especially the ones you met [Tun and May]. I feel so *anade* knowing how they will feel when they receive the news. (Personal Interview, 14 August 2011)

He clarified that his donors never demanded anything in return. They gave because they simply enjoyed watching the progress of his monastic career and achievements (e.g. meditation, academic awards). He described their pride in knowing their role in making it possible. By disrobing, he would fail to live out this career and the joys that inspired their gifts. U Sopaka then paused, turning to past gifts and his mother:

> They [Tun and May] have given donations for many years. On so many occasions… I have no idea how much they gave… If I disrobe, it won't be long before they find out. I worry that they'll tell my mother. She was also proud of my ordination and monastic accomplishments. As her son, I don't want to take that away from her. The Blessed-One [the Buddha] preached that we owe our parents so much. It's my duty to take care of her as well as myself. Having been a monk for so long, I could be a burden on her. I never acquired skills for living a lay life. On top of that, people do not

> welcome disrobed career monks [monks ordained for a long period]. Everyone thinks they are a waste, useless. (Personal Interview, 14 August 2011)

U Sopaka then joked that, as much as he dreaded these feelings, they were also appreciated:

> Even though I can't stand this feeling of *anade*, I see that it is ultimately a good thing because it keeps me in the robes. Remaining a monk is good for me and the family... (Personal Interview, 14 August 2011)

No English word sufficiently conveys the intricacies of *anade*.[20] *Anade* is evoked when individuals encounter feelings of anxiety, embarrassment or even fear that impedes or paralyzes action. This occurs in situations where an anticipated behavior risks violation of moral duty, respect of protocol or social etiquette. This can be illustrated by three general scenarios. Firstly, a speaker may express *anade* when hesitating to carry out an action that may inconvenience, insult or embarrass a person worthy of respect (e.g. an elderly person, a teacher, a monastic). For example, if a respected person makes a statement to which one objects, feelings compelling criticism are stifled by *anade*. Secondly, *anade* is voiced in situations where one feels incapable of adequately helping someone in need. This ranges from explicit requests for assistance to duties of helpfulness. Thirdly, *anade* is uttered when someone shows reluctance to accept a gift. This reluctance covers a range of possible sentiments. A recipient may feel happy to receive a gift, but may be distressed that it might inconvenience the giver or that s/he is unsure of how to reciprocate adequately. Conversely, recipients may wish to refuse the gift, but fear offending the giver or undermining the act of generosity. Balancing feelings of *anade* is considered a skill. To lack *anade* is to be an ingrate. Having too much *anade*, one would yield to others excessively, at one's personal expense.

Despite its applicability to a wide range of social situations, narratives about *anade* are often inflected by themes of reciprocity. The third scenario —exchange of gifts—most explicitly addresses pressures of reciprocation. This is a matter of not only repayment, but also consensual participation. While the second and third scenarios are explained in terms of duty and social hierarchy, status differences are often cast in terms of debt and obligation. For example, monks, teachers, and parents are persons deserving of respect and showing respect is an obligation. They achieve this position through their valued contributions to others—gifts. Gift-giving is thus implicit in high status and the duty to respect is tied to that implicit gift. In short, evoking *anade* signals a conflict of reciprocity.

U Sopaka's use of *anade* may seem unexpected. As a monk, he has a higher social status and would certainly not be expected to provide services to lay supporters in return. Yet, here, doubting monasticism complicates status distinctions. U Sopaka's narrative shows that he is not

simply a monk, but a monk inhabiting a possible future as a disrobed layman, a social position lower than that of his mother (a parent) and his patrons (older people who have helped him in the past). Narrating this possible future allows him to imagine social situations that could induce *anade*. For instance, U Sopaka states that his donors never made any demands. Gifts were given out of sheer pride and joy about his monastic career.[21] Previously, receiving *dāna* was never construed in terms of 'giving' these feelings to others. However, realizing that disrobing will cause them to end, he voices responsibility for their past and future feelings of pride and joy. Unable to imagine how these lost feelings would be remedied and feeling distressed about causing such harm to his superiors, he names this feeling *anade*.

U Sopaka's narration of debt might also strike one as odd. Since *dāna* is theoretically given with no strings attached, one might expect debt to have no place in the lay life of a disrobed monk. It is impossible to know whether or how U Sopaka has maintained awareness of past gifts. However, as he imagines a possible future as a layman, the burden of past gifts either becomes tangible or is entirely invented.[22] In other words, as his relationships are imaginatively recalibrated in accordance with his prospective new status, so, too, is his memory of past *dāna*. In creating narrative coherence from the perspective of a layman, past gifts between monk and layman become remembered as gifts between two laypersons. *Dāna*, long after the act, is transformed into a lay gift, activating obligation and reciprocation. Debt also intrudes in connection with his biological mother. U Sopaka is indebted to his mother by virtue of her sacrifices as a parent. The practice of monasticism is widely held as a means of repaying parental debt. When U Sopaka was ordained, he became his mother's gift to the *sangha*. By remaining in the robes, U Sopaka protects her gift, a service that offsets his parental debt. Losing his monastic status and its counterbalancing effect, the debt resurfaces. While there are many ways for children to repay parental debt as laypersons, U Sopaka's inability to foresee a path to paying off this debt makes him incapable of narrating an acceptable lay life. The same applies to the debt owed to his donors.[23]

Doubting monasticism, U Sopaka confronts the threat of interpersonal breakdown and his inability to foresee moral living in such a position. This threat is narrated through imagined futures organized by the moral principles of *anade*, which follow a moral logic of reciprocity. By introducing a framework for understanding how relationships become compromised, U Sopaka is able to define and envision the challenges of two possible future selves, one as a disrobed layman and the other as a dissatisfied monastic. As a disrobed layman, he anticipates an oppressive burden of debt. He would owe his mother a parental debt and his donors a debt for what was formally *dāna*. The formal debt is compounded by the

anticipated disappointment of losing the pride and joy derived from his monastic career. There are pragmatic concerns as well. Although he might be able to conceptualize how to rectify debt, the path of implementation is beyond his grasp. As a layman, he has no viable means of preserving these valued relationships, no moral agency to live well with others. U Sopaka's narrative of a lay future falters not because he is unable to imagine how laypersons live; rather, he is unable to imagine lay life with *his* monastic past or to narrate a future that inherits this past and preserves his dignity.

So long as he remains a monastic in doubt, U Sopaka remains free of the debt that would appear upon disrobing. While his social status and daily routines remain constant, monastic life is not narrated as it was before. As a monk in doubt, monasticism is not only dissatisfying, but inflected by the juxtaposition of a possible lay life. Remaining in the robes becomes an active choice of being a monk and *not being* a layman. Imagining the tumult of a lay transition, monasticism becomes a safe haven. As a choice of personal discontent to rescue others from harm, maintaining monasticism becomes an ethical action or what he calls something 'good for me and the family'. The practice of monastic life—*dāna* being one part—thus remains the same, but its meanings and moral significance are made anew.

While the event of disrobing is located somewhere in a murky hypothetical future, its threat is felt in the present. The joys of ongoing events of *dāna* are a sour reminder of the painful repercussions of potential disrobing. Narrating two possible futures fractures the self. Yet these narratives also work together to reinforce confidence in U Sopaka's choice to remain in the robes in the face of doubt. As a doubting monk actively choosing monasticism, his current self is recast as a moral agent embracing burdensome duties for others. Living agentively and morally with others is imagined to be beyond the grasp of the disrobed layman. In other words, both narratives complement one another to make the monastic life—the foundation of his current interpersonal world—more livable and the lay life —the danger to this world—less tempting.

The second narration of *dāna* is in stark contrast with the first. Previously, *dāna* was nearly invisible, subtly integrated within a performance of hospitality. Now, *dāna* surges to the forefront as the central conflict around which the narrative coheres. Similarly, when narrating himself as a guest, U Sopaka's monastic status faded into the background. Now, in this moment of stress, the monastic–lay divide becomes much more salient. Ironically, when *dāna* is narrated less conventionally (as a socially reciprocal practice), conventional social boundaries between monk and layman are more visible. This narrative also introduces greater temporal complexity to *dāna*. U Sopaka's present and past cohere in relation to each possible future. Past events of *dāna* that have already been defined are susceptible to a future that remains only

potential. Meanings of *dāna* are thus not fixed in the moment of performance, but open to revision in relation to imagined futures. Narrating two possible futures, U Sopaka maintains parallel and even contradictory understandings of *dāna* simultaneously.

Beneficiary–benefactor relations

One year after voicing doubt, U Sopaka disrobed.[24] Overcome by feelings of *anade* and anticipating his donors' attempts of dissuasion, U Sopaka departed in secret. His plan was to conceal the news until he had successfully established himself in his new lay life. After months without contact, Tun and May became concerned about U Sopaka's uncharacteristic absence and contacted his monastic associates. Eventually they learned of his disrobing and details of his recent employment. May soon arrived at U Sopaka's place of work in tears, accusing U Sopaka of abandoning her, his mother. She explained that she could accept his departure from monasticism, but not his total disappearance from their lives. Paralyzed, U Sopaka's worst fears—facing his donors as a disrobed layman—had come to pass. Consoling May, U Sopaka's employer promised that they would work something out, urging her to return the following day with Tun. Over the next few days, U Sopaka, Tun, and May devised a business plan whereby Tun and May would invest in a new business managed by U Sopaka.

After a few years, U Sopaka's business boomed. Through persistence and good fortune, he comfortably transitioned into lay life and even recovered the web of social relations from his former monastic life. He finally visited his mother, conveying the news of his monastic departure and bearing expensive gifts to reassure her of his financial security. U Sopaka's mother no longer spoke nostalgically of his ordination, but of futures made possible by U Sopaka's newfound wealth. His filial care of his mother swung from the position of monk to businessman. The trips to Tun's home resumed. Although no longer a monastic, U Sopaka is still received with pride and joy. Now, however, U Sopaka is the one who carries the envelope full of cash. U Sopaka estimates giving approximately 20–30% of his profits to Tun. This percentage was never negotiated, but simply an amount U Sopaka feels inclined to give.

U Sopaka shared this story well after his transition. Learning of the investment of his former monastic patrons, I asked whether Tun's supply of start-up capital maintained his position as a patron and whether U Sopaka still called him *dakā-krī"* (the term of address for a monastic sponsor). U Sopaka replied: "No, he is no longer my monastic sponsor. That title was tied to my monastic status. Now he is my benefactor [*kye"-jū"-rhaṅ*' in Burmese, pronounced *Jay-zoo-shin*]." (Personal interview, 14 August 2011) Questioned whether this signified a new relationship, U Sopaka explained:

> As my monastic sponsor, Tun was my benefactor. Although no longer my monastic sponsor, Tun continues to support me and he is therefore still my benefactor. A monastic sponsor is a kind of benefactor. The same can be said of our current partnership. (Personal interview, 4 September 2014)

I asked U Sopaka how long he would continue to pay Tun, presuming that these payments were aimed at repaying his loan. He answered:

> These days I don't think about what I need to repay. I am grateful for what Tun has given me and my gifts are an expression of that gratitude. I could never exhaust that feeling, nor would I want to. (Personal interview, 4 September 2014)

The Burmese term for benefactor signifies a person in a position of power who confers benefits (e.g. material resources or knowledge) to someone in a position of need, a beneficiary.[25] The five recipients worthy of infinite veneration—the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, parents, teachers—are celebrated as the quintessential benefactors.[26] Beneficiaries are not expected to reciprocate proportionally, nullifying their debt. Rather, they are obligated to display gratitude, which materializes depending on the precise nature of the relationship.[27] Gratitude is conveyed to the triple gem—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—through religious activities such as veneration, preservation of the teachings or implementation of practice. Benefactors such as parents and teachers are shown gratitude through regular visits, small gifts, availability, and the performance of veneration. The benefactor–beneficiary relationship appears to sustain the circulation of gifts and reciprocal giving. However, what is given is not only of unequal value, but also different in kind. The benefactor gives a benefit that is needed. The beneficiary is incapable of catering to the needs of the benefactor and thus unable to reciprocate with a gift in kind. Instead, beneficiaries offer gifts signifying gratitude. Debt moves only in one direction. The relative gap in status persists and is reaffirmed through exchange.[28]

As his business investor, Tun's designation as benefactor is consistent with conventional uses of the term. Calling Tun's monastic sponsorship a form of beneficence, however, moves categories into murky territory. Benefactor (*kye"-jū"-rhaṅ*) is not among the various terms that monks use to address laypersons. Such a title also appears to invert the theorized lay–monastic *dāna* relationship. Monastics are considered the benefactors of the laity because the gift of the teachings is superior to material resources, an expression of gratitude or veneration. While this tension could be resolved through theological reasoning, it is more important to understand what U Sopaka accomplishes through speaking in these terms. Narrating his lay transition through the moral principles of the benefactor–beneficiary relationship, the businessman U Sopaka establishes continuity between his new world as a layman and his monastic past. His narrative

begins with his retreat into isolation where he can safely plan a means of establishing a new life that can incorporate his past. U Sopaka's unexpected encounter with May is initially unwelcome, flooding him with feelings of *anade*. Through the skillful intervention of his employer, U Sopaka was able to save this relationship. This did not entail eliminating debt, but discovering a means of living with it morally through a newfound expression of gratitude. With this arrangement, his moral agency was restored, empowering him to rehabilitate a world that was previously difficult to envision.

Through narration, U Sopaka redefines monasticism and lay life as two embodiments of this new relationship. *Dāna* and business investment become comparable forms of support. The debt of past *dāna* is like the debt of the business investment. The status of this debt contrasts radically with its previous narration. Beneficiaries are expected to be in debt; debt is not undignified as long as gratitude is expressed, here manifest as envelopes full of cash. U Sopaka even goes so far as to say that he appreciates this debt because it ensures the continuity of Tun's commitment to his wellbeing during a precarious time, which is to say that his new role gains meaning by being understood in conjunction with his past through narrative.

Establishing continuity clearly supports U Sopaka's efforts to save his past. Yet, why narrate this continuity if he has already successfully transitioned to a lay beneficiary? I suspect that U Sopaka senses tension between his successful transition and the conventional narratives of disrobed career monks. Moreover, stories about disrobed career monks typically emphasize radical disjuncture. Former career monks are often said to live in shame or to run away to start a new life without a monastic past. In fashioning a lay life that recovers his past, U Sopaka swims against the current and this has real effects on his perception of himself and others' perceptions of him. Narrating his story to me and others is a way of reaffirming the reality that is in tension with the norm.

The final narration once again recalibrates meanings of *dāna*. Previously, past and present were oriented in terms of a possible future; here, the present determines past and future. As the practice of *dāna* and monasticism end, the memory of them is reinterpreted in terms of the present lay relationship. Similar to the performance of hospitality, *dāna* and the lay–monastic divide become less prominent, elided by other roles. The moral principles of the previous narrative are not inapplicable here. *Anade* certainly operates for beneficiaries. The difference, however, is U Sopaka's position. Before he became a beneficiary and lacked a means of expressing gratitude, U Sopaka experienced debt as oppressive and disempowering. After receiving the commitment of Tun's business investment, debt is neither a burden requiring resolution nor an existential threat. Debt is not only bearable to live with, but is also

celebrated. When thinking of debt, U Sopaka sees how others have cared for him and looks upon them with great admiration. Giving with pleasure and high regard for the recipient resembles theorizations of *dāna* as a form of asymmetrical reciprocity. Similar to the way *dāna* is theorized as the practice of esteem, gifts to beneficiaries are given with pleasure, with admiration for the recipient, and without any expectation that the recipient could reciprocate in kind or that status gaps could narrow.

Conclusions

In this article, I have examined narratives of *dāna* by the monastic U Sopaka. I have shown how the gift, its giving, and its receiving become meaningful through the narrative coherence thematically structured by the moral principles of hospitality, *anade*, and benefactor–beneficiary relations. Not only is *dāna* itself diversely conceptualized, but also specific events of *dāna* are under-determined, subject to reinterpretation, as givers and receivers navigate evolving interpersonal relations. In the first narrative, U Sopaka comfortably resides in the rhythms of harmonious monastic–lay interactions. In the absence of threat, narrative is not deployed as a means of making the world more livable. Rather, narration is part of U Sopaka's everyday moral dispositions within the performance of hospitality. In contrast, the second narrative takes place in conditions of anticipated threat. As a doubting monk, the daily routines of monasticism remain the same; however, its experience changes as U Sopaka is distressed by anxieties about an uncertain future, whether he will harm others or lose intimate relationships. Narrating according to the moral principles of *anade*, U Sopaka recodes the meaning of monastic actions, transforming everyday monasticism into an active ethical choice that staves off the harm of a possible lay future. Construing monasticism as virtuous and lay life as dangerous, U Sopaka's narration makes his current monastic lifestyle more livable. The third narrative, organized around the principles of benefactor–beneficiary relations, takes place after the loss of monasticism and during U Sopaka's attempt to create a new lay life. While he has achieved a means of preserving former relationships, the new lay world is not entirely secure. Knowing stories of disrobing that express radical disjuncture between life as a monk and life as a layman, U Sopaka narrates to reinforce his successful bridging of the two, which is in tension with the norm.

U Sopaka cited neither texts nor explicit doctrines in the course of discussing *dāna*. While hospitality, *anade*, and benefactor–beneficiary relations could be assigned to the category of 'Burmese culture', they are not distinctly Burmese and are indeed found throughout the Theravāda Buddhist world and Buddhist literature. The diverse modalities of narration

also demonstrate that Buddhist doctrines or textual models concerning *dāna* are not singular. Rather, Buddhist texts and cultures are endowed with various strategies of moral reasoning that enable Buddhists to work through the complexities of gift problems. Perhaps 'Buddhism' and 'social forces' should be seen less as a binary in tension than a mutually constitutive pair.

For those familiar with Theravāda Buddhist monasticism, U Sopaka's journey from monk to successful lay businessman may appear exceptional. While this case is admittedly extraordinary, what is representative is the close relationship between givers and receivers of *dāna* and the importance of these relations for the narration of *dāna*. If U Sopaka did not have close relations with Tun, May or his mother, *dāna* would not have troubled him and its narration would not have been directed toward restoring moral agency. The practice of *dāna* certainly occurs between monks and laypersons who have no prior history; however, givers and receivers of *dāna* are rarely complete strangers. *Dāna* predominantly circulates between laypersons and monastics within a bounded locale where previous contact or personal history is highly probable (e.g. a village, neighborhood, ethnic enclave). Recurring social encounters foster not just familiarity, but also intimacy between the two groups. Monks often grow close to long-term sponsors and monasteries are sites where monastics and laymen affectionately socialize (Samuels 2010, 19).[29] It is not unusual either that donors are persons with whom monks had deep personal relations prior to ordination. A donor could be a former spouse or a member of a monk's biological family.[30] Since close lay–monastic relations are extensive, *dāna* is likely to be re-narrated among both monastics and lay-givers.

This article opened by historicizing the scholarly study of *dāna* in relation to reciprocity. Like anthropologists who report diverse observations of Buddhist gift-giving, I find that the narratives diverge in their forms of and emphasis on reciprocity. It would be a mistake to read these findings as evidence for inconsistency of the social forces of reciprocity—thus suggesting limits to Mauss's theory—because narratives and social forces cannot be taken as equivalent. Yet, separation does not preclude connection. I posit that narrative can be understood as a response, a means of ordering, making sense of, and coping with conditions of stress and disorder. Social forces of reciprocity could be one such condition. If *dāna* acts like a gift in ways conceptualized by Mauss, it would obligate monks to reciprocate. Since returning a gift in kind is prohibited, reciprocal actions manifest through the ways that monastics please donors, such as regular social visits, availability for ritual services or monastic achievements. As long as donors are satisfied with their monastic investment, the balance of reciprocation is maintained. While balanced, the forces of reciprocity—although ubiquitous and in operation—are not tangibly felt and do not surface in narratives.

The moment exchange becomes compromised, reciprocity surfaces in narratives as narrators grapple with the disorder of gift pressures. U Sopaka's narrative most acutely exhibits principles of reciprocity when he is most adversely affected by its demands. As a doubting monk, his means of reciprocity (monasticism) is burdensome. Although this burden could be lifted through disrobing, imagining reciprocity as a future layman proves difficult. Anticipating a future with either an unpleasant form of reciprocation or no tangible means of reciprocation, reciprocity is felt most oppressively and its narration is most salient. The other two narratives—either non-reciprocal or less reciprocal—could be understood in terms of the weakened experience of reciprocity. When latent mechanisms of social reciprocity are easily satisfied and less tangible, it is possible to experience gifts in non-reciprocal ways. In other words, *dāna* may be narrated as non-reciprocal when social pressures of reciprocity recede (satisfied reciprocal exchange).

This interpretation posits a proportional relationship between the experience of reciprocal pressures and the narration of reciprocity. Also plausible is an inverse relationship, whereby gifts are narrated as non-reciprocal when pressures of reciprocity are unmanageable. Reconsidering U Sopaka's first and third narratives, we can see that, as monk and employee, U Sopaka is in an asymmetrical relationship of gift-exchange and incapable of rectifying the debt that is steadily mounting. By narrating his asymmetrical gifts as an expression of gratitude, a relationship threatened by unbalanced reciprocity is reinscribed as a non-reciprocal moral relationship sustained by the proper performance of benefactor and beneficiary. The debt is not invalidated, but obscured—and thus made tolerable—by affirmation of a different relationship. Similarly, U Sopaka's narration of hospitality could reflect a strong awareness that he is not reciprocating Tun's gift. By framing this encounter as a friendly visit, he suppresses the gift and its pressures from unbalanced reciprocation. Reciprocity enters the narrative when balance is conceivable. When U Sopaka imagines himself as a future layman, he is no longer shackled by the restrictions of his social role as a monk—an asymmetrical position in a relationship of exchange. Narrating himself in a reciprocal relationship is empowering, even though the means of exchange were unclear in that moment.

As much as potentially signifying a greater or lesser intensity of reciprocal pressure, narratives about gifts could also respond to entirely unrelated conditions of stress. For example, we might presume that U Sopaka's second narrative responds to gift pressures due to his prominent articulation of debt. Naming 'debt' the root of his stress may not be the recognition of its once latent existence, but an attempt to concretize, understand, and process his distress. In other words, gift-obligations are less a cause of distress than a framework for understanding it. In this case, reciprocity is not located in the action of gift-giving, but in

narrative strategies deployed to work through feelings of interpersonal stress that would be otherwise nonsensical. Regardless of whether gifts create social forces that compel reciprocity, here we see how reciprocity can exist as a mode of narration summoned to create opportunities for moral action when they are otherwise unavailable.

The conditions to which U Sopaka's narrative responds are ultimately inaccessible and a matter of speculation. Since narratives about *dāna* are not transparent windows into the experience of latent mechanisms of reciprocity, they can neither confirm nor deny the validity of Mauss's claims. I therefore do not argue against Mauss. In fact, Mauss can be a powerful resource for helping us to imagine conditions in which Buddhists narrate, as demonstrated above. I argue against using Buddhist gift narratives as direct evidence for evaluating Mauss's theory. Narratives can teach us how Buddhists work through ever-fluctuating relations between givers and receivers. Buddhists narrate gift-giving in reciprocal and non-reciprocal terms because different situations call for different strategies of narrative coherence. Instead of posing the question whether Buddhist gifts make reciprocation obligatory, I encourage more attention to how Buddhists—and persons of other religious traditions—narrate gifts, which may yield greater understanding of the conditions in which reciprocity enters the words of religious persons in gift-exchange relationships.

Notes

1. All Burmese and Pāli words are transliterated according to Library of Congress conventions.
2. Mauss draws these conclusions from Brahmanical materials. Non-Buddhist sources are relevant to the study of Buddhist *dāna* because South Asian theorizations of the gift were not confined within religious traditions. For further details, see Heim (2004).
3. As an example, Heim illustrates how *dāna* is theorized as a practice of esteem (*śraddhā*), whereby gifts are given with pleasure and regard for a worthy recipient of higher relative status. A practice of balanced reciprocity—and its effects that narrow status gaps—would undermine the ritual by compromising the necessary precondition of hierarchical difference (Heim 2004; Hibbets 2000).
4. Jonathan Parry argues that the non-reciprocal gift displaces reciprocal gifts from the 'profane world' to a transcendent or soteriological realm (Parry 1986, 462).
5. The predominant explanation of the reciprocity of *dāna* is 'karmic investment' (Ohnuma 2005, 110). Giving *dāna* generates merit, which subsequently translates into a variety of benefits such as a better rebirth (Moerman 1966, 159), magic powers (Terwiel 1976, 401), elevated social status (Keyes 1990, 175) or prestige (Burr 1978, 106; Schober 1989, 62). As an exception to this trend, Stanley Tambiah conceives of *dāna* as a merit transfer where monks are actively 'conferring' or 'transmitting' merit to lay givers (Tambiah 1970, 213).

6. Transactions between the monkhood and laity may be characterized as an exchange of different kinds of *dāna*. Laypersons give monks material necessities (*amisa dāna*) and monastic recipients give the teachings of Buddha (*dhamma dāna*) (Strenski 1993, 144; Falk 2007, 142, 225).
7. The special issue of *Religion Compass* on "Comparative Anthropology of Buddhist Transactions: Moving beyond the Maussian Terminology of the Gift" features six articles by Nicolas Sihlé, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, Céline Coderey, Gérard Toffin, Cecile Campergue, and Jane Caple. Inspired by French Social Anthropologists Alain Testart and Florence Weber, the authors constitute their objects of study as 'transfers' and distinguish an array of Buddhist transfers such as donations, offerings, remunerations, etc. The overall aim of comparing Buddhist gifts, as Sihlé explains, is to illuminate distinctions between fields of practice as well as similar fields of practices in different contexts (Sihlé 2015, 348).
8. By turning to narrative, I do not intend to intervene in the scholarly study of narrative and storytelling. Rather, my objective is to take the insights of this literature and apply them to the study of *dāna*.
9. Each account is presented through a combination of summary and direct quotations, highlighting the context in which it took place and the limitations of my own representation of that context.
10. The term 'intersubjective context' is more precisely defined than 'intersubjectivity' which has been variously defined across a range of academic disciplines. I use the term 'intersubjective' to stress how narration occurs within a space shared by the narrator, the audience, and the persons evoked in the narrative.
11. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
12. Similar to many places in the world, in Myanmar, the usage of kinship terms is not confined to members of one's biological family, but extended to others as an expression of affection or intimacy (Brohm 1957, 111–114).
13. Higher ordination (*upasampada kamma*) is a ritual that confers full monastic status. For further details about ordination procedures, see Spiro (1970, 234–247), Bunnag (1973, 39–42), Swearer (2010, 51–58), and Lester (1973, 88–93).
14. For additional references to *rahan' dakā*, see Spiro (1970, 342) and Keyes (1995, 161).
15. For additional references to the role of ordination sponsorship for lay religiosity, see Eberhardt (2006, 146).
16. In the event that sponsors are unable to maintain their responsibilities, the position can be transferred to others through a ritual called *kaṃ thap*. The procedure is a condensed reenactment of an ordination ceremony that has no effect on the monk's monastic seniority.
17. Jeffrey Samuels's account of Narada Thero—the head monk of the Pologoda Vihara—illustrates another case of *dāna* fostering intimacy (2010, 11–12).
18. Practices of hospitality are illustrated throughout Buddhist literature, especially in discussions of lay moral life. Two examples from the *Jātaka* literature (narratives of the Buddha's past lives) are the *Mahā Assāroha Jātaka* and the *Pīṭha-Jātaka*. For further discussion of Buddhist hospitality, see Hla Pe (1985, 155-159), Bekker (1964), Heim (2004), and Rotman (2011).
19. Temporary ordination is a common practice among Theravāda Buddhists in Southeast Asia and the disrobings raise little notice (Tambiah 1970, 108–109). In Myanmar, the reaction differs for 'career monks' (those ordained for an extended period). In such cases, communal responses range from disappointment to outrage, posing significant challenges for life after monasticism. Many retreat in secret to their families. Others run away, hoping to start a new life in a place where their monastic

past is unknown. There are certainly disrobed career monks who successfully transition and even receive assistance from lay donors. Jane Bunnag observes that lay sponsors help prepare monks for lay life (1973, 157). I am aware of instances in Myanmar where disrobed monks marry into the families of their former principal patrons. It is difficult to assess the various ways that career monks continue or discontinue relationships with donors because the topic is taboo. For further details about disrobing across the Theravāda world, see Crosby (2014).

20. In his entry on *anade*, Adoniram Judson comments on the complexities of translating this term into English: "v. to be deterred by feelings of respect (delicacy, constraint), or fear of offending [the most expressive word in the Burmese language]" (Judson 1893, 133). For a detailed analysis of the term, see Bekker (1964). Other helpful accounts are given by Kawanami (2013, 136–139), Jordt (2007, 99), Seekins (2006, 66–67).
21. Another account of the lay pride in monasticism is Eugenia Kaw's discussion of U Thukha who recounts the experiences of the lay support of his monastic ordination (2005, 82–88).
22. Keshab, a Theravāda monk from Nepal, expresses similar sentiments when facing disrobing: "When I was a novice in Nepal, before I went to Thailand, I had received sponsorship from a lot of people. A lot of people had invested in me. When a Thai monk disrobes nobody cares much because there are so many thousands of monks in Thailand. But in Nepal there are very few and each one who disrobes is a big loss to the community. I didn't want to disrobe in Nepal because I knew people would be angry and I didn't want to face them." (LeVine and Gellner 2005, 231)
23. Parental debt is a topic of active concern for Buddhists across the Theravāda Buddhist world. Monasticism is commonly understood as a means of repaying parental debt. For a wide range of references to and discussions of these topics, see van Esterik (1996), Burr (1978, 107), Eberhardt (2006, 94–95, 141–143), Tannenbaum (1995, 86–87, 130–132), Kaw (2005, 82–88), Spiro (1970, 236), Swearer (2010, 53–54), Htin Aung (1966, 140–141), Scott (1882, 328), Crosby (2014, 100), Tambiah (1970, 107), Kirsch (1985, 318), Ohnuma (2006), and Keyes (1984, 228).
24. Upon disrobing, monks relinquish the monastic titles that they received upon ordination, returning to their pre-monastic lay names. To avoid confusion, I will continue to refer to U Sopaka by his monastic title.
25. This term is *kye"-jū"-khaṃ*, translating as "one who experiences, enjoys or receives good deeds" (author's translation).
26. Formalistic prayers spoken at the start of many religious ceremonies in Myanmar often evoke this group: "I raise my joined hands in reverence, worship, honor, care for, and pay homage to the Three Jewels with my parents and teachers once, twice, and three times." It is worth noting that 'teachers' encompass a wide range of persons. They include not only those affiliated with formal institutions of learning (monastics, tutors, schoolteachers), but any relationships with elements of training. Many professional relationships involve dimensions of apprenticeship, an investment in learning. The Burmese terms for teacher and boss are actually the same (*ca-rā*). For further details, see Spiro (1970, 201).
27. The Burmese term for gratitude, *kye"-jū"-si*, translates as knowing your benefits or good deeds from others. This word corresponds with the Pāli term *kataññuta*, which translates as "to know what was done for you" (author's translation). For further details on *kye"-jū"-si*, see Hla Pe (1985, 159–160) and Kyo' Thvat' (1994, 59–67); for further details on *kataññuta*, see Tachibana (1926, 227–236) and Weeraratne (1990).

28. For additional references to benefactor–beneficiary relationships in Myanmar, see Watanabe (2015), Spiro (1970, 340), Tannenbaum (1995, 84–86), Schober (1989, 106), and Eberhardt (2006, 95–96). These relationships are often documented under the heading "patron–client relationships" (Hanks 1962; Scott 1972).
29. Monastic–donor intimacy is well documented in studies of Buddhist nuns. Buddhist monks and nuns are not directly comparable because of status differences and their effects on mediating lay–monastic relations. Nevertheless, detailed attention to the relationships between nuns and laity serves as a useful corollary (Salgado 2013, 185–210; Kawanami 2013, 132–136).
30. Tambiah observes that monastic–lay relations occur between family members (1970, 212). Many examples of such relations may be found in monastic biographies. For more examples of patronage relations in Myanmar history, see Kirchenko (2008).

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Notes on contributor

Charles Carstens is a PhD candidate in the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard University. His research explores theories and practices of power articulated in the Pāli and Burmese literatures of pre-colonial Burma. His recent publications address issues of politics, conflict, identity, and religion in contemporary Myanmar.

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