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## Practicing Dana, Sila, and Bhavana as I Transition

By Kei Tsuruhatani

**W**hen I finally swallowed a small blue pill that smelled like an odd mint for the first time last year, I cried. Taking Estradiol and Spironolactone for hormone replacement therapy (HRT) helped me feel a sense of worthiness I had never been offered before, either by society or by myself. But it hasn't been easy.

I recently celebrated my one year anniversary of starting the medical and social transition as a transgender woman. Though medical transition through HRT, which is also called Gender Affirming Hormone Therapy, does not make my transgender identity more legit, I have never given myself something so important. And it is through practicing the Buddhist principles of *dana* (generosity), *sila* (commitment to nonharming), and *bhavana* (cultivation of a wholesome mind) that I have started to trust that I might, in fact, be worthy of such a gift.

This last year has been a mixture of doubt, joy, depression, acceptance, desire, grieving, confusion, disillusionment... Intense would be one word to describe it all. Though I'm a trans woman, I do not present hyperfeminine, nor do I subscribe to the typical aesthetics of "man" or "woman." But because I make my livelihood as a meditation teacher and Broadway performer, my appearance is public, and I have felt constant internal and external pressure to "look like a woman" by wearing certain clothes, hairstyles, and makeup. It's not so simple. When Broadway opened up after an almost-two-year COVID-19 shutdown, going back to rehearsals was a big moment for me. I was able to have conversations with the producers and creative team about what changes I might need to feel aligned with my newly reclaimed identity. Outside of the show, I slowly started to audition for female, transgender, or gender nonconforming roles. Though that came with infinite doubts, my artistry expanded further as I played roles that felt more like me.

I didn't realize how exhausted I was from all of this until I sat at an online weekend retreat. Or rather, I lay down and slept during it. The pressure of my life had been cooking, and I finally found a pause to let off some of the steam. I fell asleep during almost all of the sitting sessions and took naps on breaks, then slept through the night for the first day. I felt the heaviness and delirious sensation of **sloth and torpor**, one of the five hindrances of meditation practice, where there was enough mindfulness present. My intention to do the retreat this time was to rest, not to deepen my practice, though these things go hand-in-hand—in order to go deeper, one might need to rest deeply. I appreciated that my system knew what to do and shut down, and I accepted it as a gift.

This retreat helped me recognize the severe intensity of my internal and external conditions while medically and socially transitioning. It allowed me to put down the intensity just for a while to remember the aspiration for starting HRT: as a practice of generosity toward myself.

Dana in the Buddhist context is the cultivation of generosity. It means giving without expectation, or unconditionally. Traditionally, it's practiced through giving food and medicine to renunciates, or contributing to nunneries or monasteries. Dharma teachers are often supported by people's donations. My understanding is that it's possible to contextualize dana for modern life, although there is beauty in the simplicity of the traditional sense of the word, which is unconditional offering. I practice dana by sharing my artistry and knowledge as accessibly as possible. Organizations might pay me to teach meditation, but they offer the program free of charge to participants, and I have also organized free dance and meditation classes. Broadway shows pay me the most and cost the most for people to attend. Regardless of my performance and teaching salary for both dance and

mindfulness, I do not alter what I offer—one million dollars an hour would not be enough for me and free of charge would be more than enough. This is my practice of generosity as a working artist in New York City.

I also practice **sila**, the cultivation of ethical conduct and commitment to nonharming. This notion of ethical conduct is part of the **eightfold path**, and includes the five precepts that lay Buddhists might adhere to: refraining from taking life, from taking what is not freely given, from harming with sexual activity, from wrong speech, and from taking intoxicants that could lead to carelessness. With sila, too, there is a benefit in the traditional sense of pure renunciation, especially during retreat, and modern life may not make it easy for everyone to be disciplined. Recognizing the perfectionist in myself, I take the precepts not as absolute rules but as one of many frameworks for navigating daily life that is less harmful and for building wholesome relationships; these guidelines provide a sense of comfort and trust, not rigidity and blame.

My personal practice of sila varies and has shifted many times, both on retreats and in daily life. I try to release mosquitos after they've been caught. I have stopped eating animal products. I do this with the knowledge that I will harm many beings knowingly or unknowingly. Trying not to steal anyone's time and efforts, I make sure I am respecting and listening to others with a lovingkindness attitude as much as possible. I continue to learn about the many forms of oppression that could steal the essence of someone's humanity. My husband and I practice ethical nonmonogamous (ENM) queer marriage through communicating our sexuality and desires, exploring nonhierarchical polyamory. I check in with how heedless the mind becomes with a glass of wine and edibles. I often fail to be generous and nonharming, but continuously exploring dana and sila makes me humble.

Traditionally, dana and sila are the foundation for bhavana: the cultivation of a wholesome mind through meditation practice. Besides my regular practice of **Vipassana** and the **brahma-viharas**, I often come back to the Four Guardian Meditations. Michele McDonald, one of my teachers, sometimes tells stories of the influential late Burmese monk Mya Taung Sayadaw (1916-2015), who had a deep connection with these four practices that specifically develop bhavana. They are:

1. Recalling the virtues of the Buddha
2. Contemplating 32 parts of the body
3. Lovingkindness
4. Reflection on death

Though the Four Guardian Meditations are not widely taught in the United States—perhaps, Michele imagines, because they might sound elementary to some—I have found the practices very nurturing and as protective as the “guardian” name implies. They have the balancing factors between wisdom and love. There is an inevitable vulnerability in human life with the dying body and wild mind, yet there is also the possibility to care for the fragile body and understand the mind. Anyone has the capacity for awakening, everyone is worthy. That's what these practices show me. Michele says she tries to see worthiness in herself and others even when waiting for the cashier at the grocery store, and I have tried this myself on the subway in New York. But I really needed to practice “worthiness” intentionally and patiently toward myself because I had never felt worthy of my existence as a woman, which comes up often as insecure attachment in my adult life. Through these practices I have learned to reparent myself on a nonconceptual level.

All the practices described above helped me realize that I wanted to begin HRT, although I knew the pills—which nontrans people might take for things like severe acne, hair loss, and menopause—would bring much uncertainty to my life. My doctor told me the possible side effects but made sure to inform me that they all vary from person to person. Remembering that the practice of dana is to give without expectation, but not recklessly, and feeling

informed by my therapist and doctor, I knew I would always be protected. I could always come back to the tenderness and **equanimity** of dana.

The side effects were prominent for me. During the first week, I was exhausted and stayed in bed longer because my hormone levels were readjusting. A year later, my stamina and endurance are still significantly lower than they were before; my testosterone level is a tenth of its previous level. I kept noting the unpleasantness of tension and pain in the body as well as doubts and disappointment in the mind. *What if I can't dance anymore?* Depression and despair often crept in. As I talked about my experience with friends who menstruate, we realized that transitioning is like having PMS every day by choice. With the Broadway reopening rehearsals, the changes became much more obvious, since I had done the same show for a few years prior. I could not get up from the floor for 20 minutes after the first run-through.

I think of the increased media attention on transgender women and gender nonconforming athletes and kids who are also going through HRT. Who in their right mind would go through physical, mental, and social struggles for temporary fame and success, not to mention having to go through the gatekeeping of gender-affirming healthcare? I wonder if those who write legislation and rules around transgender and gender-nonconforming athletes have ever had firsthand experience as a professional athlete on HRT. Limiting rights for transgender and gender-nonconforming athletes and young people is violent and harmful, and taking away the rights of gender identity and expression could end up killing them. I wonder if this applies to the five precepts.

Though the intensity of internal and external conditions kept rising over the year, I know HRT saved my life.

These days, two paradoxical experiences exist in my mind. One is tremendous gratitude that I can get gender-affirming medical care, and the other is fear of my humanity being violated, as my gender identity is questioned daily on the street, on social media, and in my internal voice. I know, however, that I can feel joy that I have never experienced before, and that I didn't even know how cruel I had been to myself. I did not even realize the oppression that became second nature and painted my life a few shades darker. HRT was not a cure for everything, but it affirmed how I had felt about myself since I was 3 years old. This feeling of fundamental worthiness that should not be questioned for any human being had not been there for me. It was denied to me long ago when I was naively assigned male at birth by a doctor (though this is not to blame). Now I take pills twice a day, every day, giving kindness toward myself unconditionally. It is the greatest love letter to myself. It just doesn't have words. I feel it. I will continue the practice of dana, sila, and bhavana through transition. These practices are never solid rules and goals. I understand them as an experience of rest and exploration.

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