

Don't Underestimate Merit

November 12, 2015

We're meditating, which is a meritorious activity. *Puñña* is the Pali word. There's no good English translation yet. Maybe someday someone will come up with a good one. We usually translate it as "merit," and it sounds like brownie points and merit badges. It creates an image of grasping at more happiness for yourself. And in a way it is, but we're looking for a happiness that doesn't create boundaries.

Most ways in which people look for happiness create boundaries because if happiness is dependent on having a particular relationship with a particular person or having a particular level of wealth, then one person gains, somebody else has to lose. That kind of situation is what creates boundaries, creates divisions. As the Buddha said, it's a blameworthy happiness because it depends on taking something from somebody else.

Whereas the forms of happiness that qualify as merit—and the Buddha says that activities of merit are another name for happiness—help to erase boundaries. Generosity: You're giving something away to someone else. That creates a relationship right there, erases a boundary. When you buy something, there's a boundary. The fact that money has to change hands is what creates the boundary. But when something is given, that boundary gets erased.

The same with following the precepts: You realize that your true well-being has to depend on not harming other beings. So you don't kill, you don't steal, you don't have illicit sex, you don't lie, you don't take intoxicants. At the same time, you looking after your own welfare because you don't create the kind of karma that will come back and bite you. Other people benefit; you benefit, too. In fact, when the Buddha talks about helping other people, it's basically getting *them* to observe the precepts as well. After all: They are agents and they're going to be reaping the results of their actions, so you want to encourage them to do things that will reap happiness for them.

And that moves into the meditation, which is also an activity in which you create happiness for yourself. The fact that you're dealing with your greed, aversion and delusion—trying to make them weaker, trying to make them less likely to burst out of their cages and go prowling around the neighborhood: That means that other people are

going to benefit. They don't have to be victims of your greed or of your aversion or of your delusion.

So it's good to remember that as we meditate here, it's not just for us. We're doing something that spreads its goodness around, spreads its happiness around, without any set boundaries.

Living as a monk makes this especially clear. Back when I was living in Thailand, it was frequent that when I was going for alms, some very, very poor people would put food in my bowl. This one couple in particular I remember: There were just the two of them. They'd recently got married. They had a little shack that was just big enough for the two of them to sleep in and the rudiments of a kitchen out back. But every day, they put some food in my bowl: some rice and a piece of sausage or some dried fish. I'd get back, eat their food, and warn myself, "Okay, today you're the beneficiary of a poor person's generosity. You *can't* be sloppy in your meditation. You can't be lazy. You've got to do this for them."

But even as a layperson sitting here meditating in the monastery, you're surrounded by people's generosity. The land was donated. This sala was built by people's donations. Everything inside here is a gift so that we can meditate, and then we can benefit others through our meditation. So try to keep that larger perspective in mind. Especially when you feel like you're tired in the evening and say to yourself, "Well, that's enough for tonight." You have to ask yourself, "Well, have you done a little extra for others? *Is* that enough?" Push yourself a little bit harder, so that we can repay our debt to others and learn to appreciate this happiness that spreads its goodness around.

So don't look down on the concept of merit. It's very useful. It's what develops that attitude of mind where you see that your happiness is not just yours and there's no ironclad wall built around it. Or it's not opened up to just a select few people. You realize that to be truly happy, you can't be doing anything that is really harming anybody else. And for some people that's a hard lesson to learn. It takes a while. So the fact that they're still learning this lesson on that level: Don't look down on it.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about different motivations for being generous. And the lowest one of course is, "I'll get this back with interest." But still that's a good motivation. It's better than saying, "I don't see any need to be generous at all." There's so much of *that* out there. It's when people begin to realize, okay, that if they really want to have wealth that lasts for a while, if they want to have well-being that lasts for a while, they've got to

share. And that's a meritorious motivation.

Now as you work up the levels of motivation, you finally get to the ones where it's simply a natural expression of the mind. You say to yourself, "I give simply because it's good to do this. The mind feels refreshed." That, too, is a benefit you get from it.

So don't look down on the idea that you're going to *get* something out of this. Don't think that it taints your merit or the goodness of your actions. It's simply a matter of how refined you can make your sense of how you benefit from the generosity or how you benefit from the practice of virtue, how you benefit from the meditation. As your mind grows, it just gets more and more refined.

There are some Buddhist circles where people like to say, "Our meditation practice is totally pointless and we're proud of the fact." But that's self-defeating. It means that they have to hide from themselves the fact that they're benefiting from the meditation. Or if the meditation isn't really benefiting them, they should look around for better ways to meditate.

There's a part of the mind that always calculates: "When I do this, what are the results going to be? Is it worth the effort?" Thinking in terms of merit expands your sense of how you define 'worth the effort.' If there's something that's going to be just short-term and just for me: Well, that's perhaps one level of motivation. But you can think in larger terms: long-term benefits, long-term welfare, long-term happiness, a blameless happiness. That expands your horizons, and it puts the practice of meditation into a different context.

Many of us come to meditation because we've got particular problems that cause suffering in our lives. Something's wrong, something's lacking, something's eating away at our hearts. We have a sense that meditation might be able to do something for that. That's a perfectly fine motivation for coming. And when the Buddha taught the four noble truths, suffering was the first thing he talked about.

Some people come and they have a particular problem that's been eating away; but once that problem gets solved, they stop meditating. We see some of that. But there are other cases: As you take care of that particular problem, you see there is a larger structure to the way we live our lives, the way we have bodies that age, grow ill and die. There are dangers out there, dangers *in here*. And the damage that those dangers can do doesn't stop just in here. Even if it comes from in here, it can spread out. You begin to see there's a larger issue here.

This is where your sense of what the practice is about begins to grow. Your sense of what constitutes well-being gets more and more

refined. But there's also a sense of, "Okay, what does make this worthwhile?"

Even when discussing the motivation for putting the teachings on not-self into practice, the Buddha says that it leads to your long-term welfare and happiness. Stop and think about that: not-self is for your happiness. Even though the practice leads beyond your "you," here's still a "you" in the motivation. And think about the Buddha's definition of discernment. It comes from the question: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Your sense of what qualifies as long-term and your sense of what qualifies as happiness get more and more demanding as your practice progresses, as your wisdom grows.

And part of the demands they make force you to turn around to examine the other part of that question: *my*. What, when I do it, will lead to *my* long-term welfare and happiness? You begin to see that your welfare and happiness, if it's very narrowly defined, is going to be self-defeating. If it's more broadly defined, that's when it can take on energy. That's when it can take on life. That's when it becomes really worthwhile. Even though there is an element calculation in the motivation, don't look down on it. Just learn how to calculate wisely: When is it worth the effort? Because that's the question the Buddha has you ask all the way down, even when you get to the highest levels of the practice.

Eventually, you realize that this sense of self that you've been straightening out as you meditate has carried you far but there comes a point where it can't carry you any further. That's the point when it doesn't become worth *doing* anymore. Your sense of self is a kind of doing. You've had many senses of selves and many ways of doing them. As you practice, you get more and more demanding about what you want to identify with and finally you get to a point where an identity becomes an activity that's not worth it anymore. It's delivered you to the threshold to something much bigger. That's when it's not worth it, because that something bigger is so much more worthwhile.

So this question of "Is this action worth doing?" is a question you have to keep in mind all the time. And don't try to hide it from yourself, thinking that it's spiritually unadvanced. Simply allow it to mature and grow as you practice.

Ultimately it'll take you to a point where there's no more doing anymore, there's no more need. But we can't short-circuit the practice by saying, "Well, I'll just go to that point first." No, you have to go

through the stages of figuring out what kinds of activity strike you as worthwhile. Put them into practice and ask yourself, “Are these the results I really want, or do I want something better?” That way you sensitize yourself to your actions, and refine your sense of what you really want out of them.

As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was, one, not being willing to give up his effort, and two not being content with skillful qualities. Listen to that. Things are good but they could be better. That was the motto that kept him going. It took him all the way. Otherwise, when you’re content with whatever little concentration you have or whatever little mindfulness you have, you say, “That’s good enough,” and that puts a stop to the practice.

We have to admit where we are and accept where we are as a starting point, but we also have to accept the fact that we have greater potential and can do better. We have to learn a mature way of living with that possibility so that we can make the most of it: to spur us on for effort that really does yield results, effort that really is worth the effort, as your sense of what’s really worthwhile will continue to grow.