

Merit & Skill

April 10, 2008

Years back, when I returned to Thailand to ordain, Ajaan Fuang told me that I would have to become skillful in everything in my life as a monk. He said, “It’s not just a matter of getting good at sitting with your eyes closed. There are lots of other skills you have to master, too.”

And it was true. In addition to meditating, I learned how to dye robes, how to sew robes, how to build a place to dye robes, how to become a carpenter, how to mix cement, all kinds of skills I had never known before.

And those are just the practical physical details around the monastery. You look at the Buddha’s path and there’s never anywhere where he says just one skill will take care of everything. The path has eight factors, or can be divided into three types of training—training in virtue, training in concentration, training in discernment. Meritorious activity has three kinds—generosity, virtue, and meditation. The Buddha was famous for making lists of all the different qualities that were required in the practice. There’s never a list of ones, which means that as you practice you’ve got to learn how to balance lots of qualities and master lots of skills. And an important part of the practice is learning how to balance them out. So it’s not only that you can do separate things skillfully, but you can figure out what’s the appropriate thing to do right now, which particular skills should get emphasis. And a lot of this has to do with your motivation.

This is where the issue of skill gets tied together with the issue of merit. In Thai, the two terms are used together very often—merit is *puñña*, skill is *kusala*, or in Thai, *kuson*—to the point that most people assume that the two are part of the same concept. Actually, they’re two separate concepts that have to be developed together. As the Buddha once said about merit, the activities of merit are another word for happiness. In other words, these are the things you do to be truly happy. This ties in with the Buddha’s insight that everything we do, every action we take, is for the sake of happiness. Of course, some types of happiness require sacrifice. Many times our happiness requires that other people sacrifice, but there are times when our own happiness requires that we sacrifice something as well. Even in an extreme case, where, say, a mother is willing to risk her life to protect her child. It’s because she feels that she would be happier dead than having to live with the thought that, if the child had died, she hadn’t done everything to protect the child. So sometimes we’re faced with difficult choices like that. But we end up choosing which one we think is going to make us happier.

So everything we do has a purpose. We think of the consequences of our actions, like the merit of generosity. We like to think that we're being generous with totally selfless motives. But actually, what we are doing is that we do have our own thought of gain, but it's a gain that doesn't harm anyone else. That's the ideal. To be totally selfless, to put your happiness aside, or some outside power's decision of what you should or shouldn't do over your true happiness, is a very unhealthy situation to be in. Or to say that you're going to totally sacrifice yourself for other people: Often there's a lack of honesty there. Somewhere deep down inside, there's a sense that there's going to be a reward coming from this.

So instead of denying the anticipation of a reward, we have to frank about it. We are generous because we want to gain something out of the generosity.

There is a sutta where the Buddha ranks the various kinds of motivation for generosity. The lowest one is, "I'll get this back with interest." From there it goes to progressively higher ones. The middle one, interestingly enough, is because it feels good to be generous. You delight in the sense of just your own inner goodness that comes when you're able to give something away. That, too, is a reward. That's a motivation. It's only when you get to the level of non-returning that you can give simply out of a sense that this is a natural ornament, as they say, for the mind. It's a natural expression of the mind state at that point. But prior to that point, all generosity is motivated by some thought of getting something in return. It's simply the question of how sophisticated and how noble the motivation is.

The same goes with the precepts. You can observe the precepts to be a good little boy or a good little girl, and there is a certain satisfaction that comes from that. But as you get into the practice of the precepts, you begin to realize that the precepts help you live with yourself more easily. You know that you live in the world without harming anybody. And it becomes a gift to everyone if you're not going to harm anybody at all, under any circumstances. When your gift of safety is universal in that way, as the Buddha said, you gain a part of that universal protection as well.

Meditation is also a meritorious activity. And again you can come to it with different motivations. For some people, it's simply a time to relax. There are people who meditate in order to gain power. There are people who meditate because they want psychic powers. But the highest motivation the Buddha gave is that you realize that you're suffering, and this is the way out. You need to train the mind, because on the one hand, there's the sense of ease and well-being that comes when you get the mind to settle down. And then there's this greater happiness that comes as you're able to let go of your various defilements, gain the insights that peel away the fetters that tie you to the constant cycle of birth and death and rebirth and redeath, again and again and again. As you cut those fetters, there's a lightness that comes into the mind, a sense of extreme relief. That, too, is a form of happiness.

So all these things we do are for the sake of happiness. Then you combine it with the principle of skill, meaning that you try to do each of these things in as skillful a way as possible.

Take generosity, for instance. Years back there was a group of people who would come regularly and they would always bring big donations of toilet paper. It never occurred to them to look to the side of the sala where we were overflowing with toilet paper. We could have opened a toilet paper store here, with practically every brand available, until someone finally took the group aside and said, “Hey look, could you bring something we really need?” And this is where the merit of generosity moves into the skill of seeing, “Am I really benefiting the other person with my generosity or am I just doing it because I like that particular gift, or feel that it’s impressive?”

Years back I was in charge of Ajaan Fuang’s funeral commemoration, which we did once a year. Part of it involved inviting monks from some nearby monasteries to come and chant. So one year I went into town with a layperson to get the gifts for the monks. We went to different stores in Rayong and got some things I thought were really cool—really nice soap, a really nice little bowl or dipper—what they call *khan* in Thai, a nice stainless steel one—some nice towels, some nice liquid detergent—things that monks rarely got. And they made a nice, compact little package.

Then the people who came from Bangkok said, “You’re going to give that little package to the monks?” I said, “Well, look what’s in the package. Nice stuff.” They said, “That’s not what matters. It has to be big.” So they went out and got more toilet paper and a big box of Tide.

So there are lots of different motivations for why people give, and it’s all meritorious. But the question of how skillful it is, is something else. It requires that you look at what’s really needed. “What can I afford so I’m not harming myself, and what would really be of help to that other person?” That’s where the skill comes in.

The same with the precepts. You may hold to the precept that you’re not going to gossip—i.e., you’re not going to engage in idle chatter. And you find yourself gossiping with somebody else. If you suddenly stop and say, “Oh my gosh, this is gossip, we shouldn’t be doing this,” the other person is going to feel miserable. It’s more skillful to steer the conversation away from the gossip in a seamless way so that you don’t come across as censorious.

In other words, all these practices require that you use your intelligence to look for the best results of your actions.

All these activities are meritorious. They do lead to happiness, but you can also add your intelligence. That’s another translation of the way the Thais understand the word *kusala*: it’s intelligent, *chalaad*. You combine your desire for happiness with your intelligence. That way, you find the right motivation, the right gift, the right person to receive the gift, the right

motivation for your precepts, the right ways to observe the precepts in ways that don't offend other people.

When you can carry both of those qualities into the meditation, the combination of happiness and skill will serve you in good stead. Because, as I said, in the meditation there are lots of qualities you've got to balance.

So think of this path as a path of many skills. Ajaan Lee's image is of a tree with lots of branches. Banana trees just have one shoot that comes up, but they don't last very long. They grow fast but then they rot out very quickly. Big trees have lots of branches. They take time to grow, but the fact that they have all those branches means that they last a lot longer, give much better shade. So all the skills that we need to develop here in the monastery, everything from learning how to clean the monastery, how to take care of things—there's the phrase in Thai, "everything from washing the spittoons on up"—it's all part of the practice in getting a sense of well-being and in developing your intelligence. After all, intelligence doesn't just come from reading books or thinking about them. It comes from actually doing something, looking at the results, and then figuring out how you can do it better. That's the kind of intelligence the Buddha is looking for on the path. And it's an intelligence that ultimately can bring a balance to all the variables, all the different qualities you need to develop here.

You're trying to develop conviction and persistence and mindfulness and concentration and discernment. And that's just one list. But as you gain a more and more intuitive sense of balance, and of how to combine lots of skills together, that's what's going to keep your practice from going off course.

There's a tendency in Western Buddhism to look down on the practice of merit, but it's an essential part of the path, realizing that you're here for happiness. You do expect results. But it's going to depend on your willingness to put something into the practice. That's part of the lesson you learn from the practice of merit.

And the other, as you get more and more familiar with the practice, is that your sense of who you are is going to change through what you do. You begin to find that old ways of finding happiness really aren't worth holding onto anymore. So you learn to let go of them. This is one of your first lessons in not-self. The things that used to define who you are start falling by the wayside.

So even though the practice of merit may seem like a selfish practice, it's not. It's training in looking at your motivation, training in looking at actions, training in how you think about happiness and how you going about try to find your happiness in a harmless way. It asks you to really look seriously at your desire for happiness instead of pretending that you're not in this for anything. You admit freely that you're in it to gain true happiness. Then the next question is,

what is the “true” in true happiness? And as you try to develop both merit and skill in the practice, you find that you get closer and closer to the answer.