

## *Appreciating Merit*

*August 1, 2010*

The mind is not a blank slate. It's not even a slate with writing all over it. It's not even a full teacup. It's more active. It feeds. It goes out looking for things and tries to ingest them. It shapes its experience—which is why you can't simply give it a meditation technique regardless of its background, regardless of its values, and hope that each mind will take the same technique and get the same results.

This is why the Buddha didn't just teach a technique of meditation. He taught a whole culture for training the mind. If you want to get the most advantage out of his teachings, you have to look at the whole culture.

They call it the customs of the noble ones. There's a discourse where the Buddha talks about these customs. The first three have to do with being content: content with whatever food you get, whatever clothing you get, whatever shelter you get—in other words, content with your physical circumstances, realizing the fact that you have a body here breathing, so you've got all the things inside you that you really need. And if your circumstances provide you with enough food to keep on breathing, enough clothing and shelter to breathe in good health, you've really got enough.

But the culture of the noble ones goes beyond just contentment, to realizing the fact that as we depend on these things, we tend to get attached. There's a danger there. There's also the danger on the other side, where you're very proud of the fact that you can get along with just very little and you look down on other people who are not as frugal as you are. That's a danger, too. So you learn how to use these things and avoid the various dangers that surround them.

The Buddha wants you to be content in terms of these things because the fourth principle of the customs of the noble ones is more active: delighting in abandoning and delighting in developing, i.e., delighting in skillful activities, training the mind to do things in a skillful way: abandoning unskillful habits and developing skillful ones in their place. The delight there is important. It means that your values support you in this practice.

We were talking earlier today about the practice of merit, and about how, here in the West, it's very difficult for us to pick up on that idea. Yet it's probably one of the most important practices to learn to get into, to try on, and then see what good things it can do for the mind. We tend to dislike it because it sounds like Brownie points, Girl Scout badges, Boy Scout badges. You try to chalk up points someplace.

But that's not the case.

As the Buddha said, "Acts of merit are another term for happiness." That's important to think about. It's not just the feeling you get from them that's happiness, it's the actual action that's a kind of happiness. We don't think of happiness as an action. We think of it more as a

feeling we get from doing things. But here you exercise an activity that feels good, that feels right. And in that—in the action itself—is the happiness. That right there is a lot to think about.

But the Buddha doesn't want you just to think about it. He wants you to do the actions to see for yourself. This is why it's important to sense the value of doing good things: of being generous, being virtuous, developing thoughts of goodwill. In that formula for the Sanghadana, the gifts given to the Sangha, at the very end it says, "Please may the Sangha accept this for our long-term welfare and happiness"—i.e., so that we can do the act of merit and find the happiness in that action.

But merit doesn't mean you have to give things only to the Sangha. As the Buddha once said, there is no "should" in giving. When King Pasenadi asked him, "Where should a gift be given?" the Buddha replied, "Wherever you feel inspired." The monks are told that when someone asks them, "Where should I give this gift I want to give?" we should say, "Wherever you feel inspired or feel that it would be well-used or well-taken care of." In other words, it's up to you where you feel inspired to give. But in finding the goodness in the action: That's the important thing. You'll find that if you give gifts to places where they're well used, there's even greater happiness. There's happiness in the planning, there's happiness in the actual giving itself, and there's happiness when you reflect on it afterwards.

Which is very different from other kinds of happiness. With the happiness that comes from experiencing, say, a sensual pleasure, there's sometimes a lot of agitation as you try to strive for that pleasure. Then, even as you're experiencing it, it's slipping out of your grasp. And when it's done, it's gone. You can't call it back. You can call back the memory, but there's no guarantee that the memory of those kinds of pleasures will be pleasant memory. Sometimes there's a lot of regret, either over the fact that that the pleasure is gone, or over the fact that you did some of the unskillful things to get that pleasure: not necessarily good memories.

But the memory of doing something you know is good is different. You look back on it with satisfaction: "Yes, I did that; I accomplished that." There was happiness in the doing, and now that it's done, there's a happiness that stays. It's for your long-term welfare and happiness is to value these acts.

This is where our culture at large is really lacking. The basic assumption is that there has to be a lot of strife and a lot of conflict. The newspapers thrive on conflict. If everybody were at peace, you couldn't sell a newspaper—except for the Sudokus and the comics—and so they try to stir up as much controversy as possible. They thrive on that. There are other people, too, who profit off of conflict, who try to keep it all stirred up. The image they project is that we can't live in peace with one another. It's either them or us.

In this kind of culture, the idea of a happiness that spreads around, a happiness that's shared, gets trampled. The people who do good are the fools: That's the attitude of the culture. You've got to fight for yourself. It's interesting that many people who don't believe in

biological Darwinism do believe in social Darwinism. The people who fight are the ones who will get ahead: That's the attitude. It's a very unhealthy culture.

So you can't expect yourself to come out of that culture straight into meditation without having to do some cultural therapy, the Buddha's therapy: learning to appreciate acts of generosity, learning how to appreciate virtue, learning how to appreciate the cultivation of skillful states of mind.

This is why gratitude is one of the basic principles in developing this sense of delight in developing, in developing a delight in abandoning. You think of the good that other people have done for you. You realize that they went out of their way—that your very life depends on the help of other people. And even though they may not have been perfect—in fact, it's very unlikely that anybody who's helped you is perfect—you learn how to appreciate their good actions.

This is something you really have to give special value to. You have to appreciate these things.

Then there's the problem in our culture where they start talking about having gratitude to things—which misses the whole point, which is to be grateful to the people who did helpful actions so that you're stirred to do the kinds of actions that abandon unskillfulness and develop skillfulness in its place.

So as we practice, we have to sort out what we've picked up from our culture—our family, the media, schools, teachers—and ask ourselves: Which things do we want to carry into the practice? Which things can we actually take as part of the training? Which things do we have to put aside? You have to realize that you can't totally blame the people from whom you picked up unskillful attitudes. After all, your mind was an active mind. It picked up things around it. You find people living in very similar environments but picking up different things from the environments. The question is not who's at fault, simply that you've got this stuff hanging in your mind, directing the way it feeds, directing the way it acts, and you can do something about it.

The saving grace is that the mind really does want happiness. If it sees that its habits are not leading to happiness and that there are alternatives, that's where the mind is trainable. It's not a machine. It learns—if it's willing to learn. Usually, running into suffering, running into stress are the things that finally force us to learn.

So even though the teaching on merit is one that we tend to overlook or push off to the side here in the West, it's something we really ought to bring back to center stage. It teaches us to appreciate the goodness of the mind, the goodness of the heart, and to look for happiness in the actions of doing good, being generous in whatever way we're capable of. This doesn't have to mean material things. You can be generous with your knowledge, generous with your time, generous with your energy, generous with your forgiveness. The act of being generous in this way is a kind of happiness.

The same with virtue: You want to learn how to appreciate restraint. Be grateful for it in other people; appreciate its value in your own life. When you're able to restrain yourself from doing something that you know is harmful, appreciate that.

We suffer from that old Christian principle that when you do good, you shouldn't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. That's not the Buddhist approach at all. You've got to appreciate your goodness so that you can keep on doing it, so that you feel the desire to continue to take delight in continuing to do it. That's part of the culture of the noble ones.

Then when you bring these attitudes into the practice, you find that the practice goes a lot more easily. Because again, you know this is a *doing* that we're doing here. We're working on developing skills.

And we've got this opportunity to do it. Take delight in that. Even if it's not going well, if you're finding that it takes more time, more energy, more effort than you might have expected, or the results aren't coming as fast as you'd like, still you've got the opportunity to sit here and do something that's really good. That in and of itself is a form of happiness. Learn how to appreciate it, because that will give you the energy to stick with it, to try to figure things out: "What's going wrong? Why am I having trouble here? Can I catch myself doing something unskillful?" without any recrimination, just saying, "Oh. I do that. I don't have to do that. Let's try something else, try some other way."

That's how the Buddha found awakening. He noticed what he was doing, and he said to himself, "This isn't working. Could there be another way? How about if I did this?" And he took joy in the action, joy in the fact that he had choices, joy in the fact that he was able to test things. That's the delight in developing, the delight in abandoning.

We have this opportunity to act, to shape our experience. Make the most of it. Try to find delight in doing it well.