

Dedicating Merit

January 1, 2016

Theravada Buddhism is often criticized for being selfish. We're not here to save all beings, we're here to save our own skin: That's what they say.

It is true that we recognize that we each are making ourselves suffer and we have to work on putting an end to that suffering ourselves. Each of us has his or her own karma. You can't take your karma and give it to somebody else.

So it looks like we're just working on our own goodness, our own happiness, and forgetting about everyone else. But when you think about goodness, you realize that it's not the sort of thing that's limited just to you. The goodness you do has to spill out into the lives of other people.

There's that image the Buddha gives of the two acrobats. One acrobat is standing on the top of a bamboo pole. Another acrobat, his female assistant, is standing on his shoulders. He says to her, "You look out after me, and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll maintain our balance and come down safely from the pole." And she replies, "No, that won't work. You have to look after yourself, and I have to look after myself, and that way we help each other maintain our balance and come down safely from the pole."

As the Buddha said, she was the one who was right in that instance: that it's in maintaining your balance that you help other people maintain theirs. The Buddha adds that when you're working on developing the establishing of mindfulness, other people benefit. In the same way that when you're kind and generous and patient with others, develop equanimity in your dealings with other people, it would seem that they're the first beneficiaries, but at the same time you benefit as well.

So Theravada rejects the idea that there's a clear line between your well-being and the well-being of others. If you do things that are really meritorious, the word *puñña*... I'd like to find a much better translation for that than merit. "Meritorious" sounds like merit badges: Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Brownie points. "Goodness," I think, would be a better translation. There's a goodness to the types of actions that count as *puñña*: generosity, virtue, developing thoughts of unlimited goodwill.

As the Buddha said, genuine happiness comes from doing good. He says that the phrase, "acts of *puñña*," is another word for happiness.

And it's a happiness that spreads around. It's not like the happiness that comes, say, from wealth or status or praise or sensual pleasures. All too often *that* kind of happiness means that when you gain it, somebody else has to lose. When they gain, you have to lose. That kind of happiness actually creates divisions.

So the person who's experiencing that kind of happiness—even though he or she may think of sharing some of it with others: Still it's pretty much *that* person's experience and that's as far as it goes. And often, as they try to experience that happiness, it's not just that other people lose out on not experiencing that happiness. The other people actually suffer, because all too often, people who are looking for that kind of happiness do all kinds of unskillful things, harmful things, to attain it.

When you think of a lot of people who gain their wealth in nefarious ways, gain their status in unfair ways, people praised by the world whose behavior is not the kind of thing you'd want to praise: There's an awful lot of that in the world. Ordinary happiness can be gained by some very unskillful methods.

But goodness: That has to be gained by skillful methods. And other people benefit at the same time.

There are the two ways they benefit. One is automatically. If you have less greed, aversion, and delusion in your mind, you're not the only one who's going to benefit. Other people will benefit from the fact that they're not the victims of your greed, aversion, and delusion anymore.

The second way is when you're more deliberate and conscious of what you're doing to spread that goodness to others. We were talking today about dedicating merit, which is a very important way of expanding the goodness of your meditation, the goodness of your generosity, the goodness of your virtue in all directions.

A brahman once came to see the Buddha and asked him, "We brahmins dedicate the goodness of our actions to our dead ancestors. What does the Buddha have to say about that?" The Buddha replies, "Yes, it can be done." And the brahman says, "Do the ancestors actually receive it?"

The Buddha says, "If they're hungry ghosts, they can." Now it is the case that some hungry ghosts have karma so heavy that they can't receive this kind of dedication. But in general, when they know that someone has dedicated merit to them, whether it's specifically to them as individuals or as a class, and if they appreciate it, their appreciation for that goodness becomes their goodness now. That's how they gain merit. They actually feed off of that. Just as the radiant gods feed off of rapture, the hungry ghosts feed off of dedicated merit.

So at the beginning of the meditation, at the end of the meditation, after a chanting session—anytime when you've done something good—you might want to stop and think, "Who are your dead ancestors? Can you dedicate the merit to them?"

When I first went to practice with Ajaan Fuang, it was shortly after my mother's death. One of the first things he said was, "At the end of every meditation, dedicate the merit of your meditation to your mother." It's an

integral part of the practice to remind you that you shouldn't be the only one benefitting from this. The benefits should go all around.

That brahman then asked the Buddha, "What if you don't have any dead ancestors who are hungry ghosts?" And the Buddha said, "Don't worry, everybody has dead ancestors who are hungry ghosts." Back in those days, they counted their ancestors back seven generations. That's a lot of people. There are bound to be some hungry ghosts in all those many branches of your family tree.

Of course, you don't have to limit it to your ancestors. You can spread goodness to anybody with whom you've had contact. There's a concept they have in Thailand of what they call *chao kam nai wen*, or the people you've wronged in the past, especially the ones who are really fixated on that. You've got to repay them. These are people we don't like to think about: the people we've wronged. We like to think that we've gone through our many lives just being very helpful and good and kind.

But who knows what we have hidden away in our past? When you look at a person in the present moment, it's not the case that you see the running balance in his or her karma account. All you see are the past actions that are sprouting right now, that are giving fruit right now. As for other actions, they're still in that person's karma field. The seeds are there in the field and they may sprout some other time. You don't know what they are.

Our memory, for the most, part extends back just into this lifetime. But when you think about all the many lives you've been around, there were probably some times when you did something that was not all that skillful. And there may be some beings who are really fixated on having been the victim of what you did. So dedicate merit to them.

Now the problem, as I said, with some hungry ghosts is that their karma may be so strong that they're not yet in a position where they can be aware of the fact that merit's been dedicated to them. And there are also those that just hold a grudge.

There was a woman who came to meditate at the monastery several years back when Ajaan Fuang was still alive. She was a friend of one of the women who cooked in the kitchen. The woman in the kitchen told Ajaan Fuang that this friend had a particular problem. Every time she tried to meditate, her body would start shaking uncontrollably.

So that night, she was meditating with us there in the chedi and, sure enough, she started shaking. Ajaan Fuang had a student who was quite psychic and he told her to look at what was happening. The woman saw these two beings behind the woman, shaking her. And to make a very long story short, she found out these had been the parents of this woman in a previous lifetime. She had killed them in that lifetime—this was a long time ago—and they

didn't like the idea that by meditating she might get out of their grasp.

So Ajaan Fuang's student asked them, "What do you want? What could she do that would satisfy you?" They said, "If she could help build a Buddha image and dedicate the merit to us, that would satisfy us." It so happened that we were building a Buddha image at the monastery at the time. So Ajaan Fuang told the student, "You can't say anything to her about this. Otherwise, it'll look like we're trying to squeeze money out of her." But a couple of years later, someone was building a Buddha image and she participated in that—and the shaking stopped.

We don't know who we've got in our past or what we've done in our past. So it's always a good idea to dedicate merit just in case, to pay off some old debts.

And as an act of kindness. Especially here in a place like America, where there hasn't been that much dedication of merit to anybody, we have a lot of hungry ghosts. You don't have to look very far: just look at the human beings around us. Lots of them are like hungry ghosts. They never seem to have enough. Everything is lacking, lacking, lacking in their lives.

In the murals in Thailand, when they draw hungry ghosts, they portray them with huge stomachs and tiny, tiny mouths. They can never get enough. In fact, in Southern Thailand they actually make a sweet from very, very thin noodles, with the idea that they're so thin that they're thin enough for a hungry ghost to eat. You give those noodles to the monks, and then the merit goes to the hungry ghost. Maybe the hungry ghost can eat the very thin noodles.

But again, you don't have to look at murals in Thailand. Look around you. There are a lot of people who just never get enough no matter how much they get. So what's going to happen to them when they die? That's pretty much where they're headed.

And because there hasn't been that much merit-making in America and very little dedication of merit, there are lots of these hungry ghosts out there who could benefit from our sharing the merit with them. If they're in the position where they can accept it and are willing to accept it, they're going to benefit.

At the same time, the dedication of merit reminds you that you also want to take the goodness of your meditation and bring it not only into the lives of those who've passed away, but also into the lives of people around you.

Ajaan Fuang had another student whose powers of concentration were extremely strong. After practicing with him for a while, she complained to him, "I don't see that concentration is having any impact on the rest of my life." She tended to have a very strong temper, and her temper wasn't going away. In fact, it was sometimes even more intense.

As he explained to her, “It’s not the case that simply doing concentration is going to have a magic-wand effect on the rest of your life. You have to take the lessons you’ve learned in the meditation, the qualities of mind you’ve developed in the meditation, and consciously bring them to bear on the rest of your life.” This is one of the ways you bring the merit of your meditation out and spread it around.

So when you leave meditation, don’t really leave it. Try to think of the attitudes you’ve developed. You’ve had to develop some patience, you’ve had to develop some equanimity, some kindness for yourself. You’ve had to develop the ability to hold your thoughts in check, to exercise some restraint. Well, try to bring these qualities into your day-to-day interactions with other people. Learn some restraint, learn some equanimity.

If you’ve been meditating properly, you’ve developed these skills. But don’t just leave them on the meditation cushion. Take them along with you. See your interactions at work, your interactions at home, as part of the practice, as your opportunity to spread some of the goodness of the meditation around.

What this comes down to is that goodness shouldn’t be just for one individual. And if it’s really good, it’s not. The effects should spread around. Even though each of us has to work on his or her own karma, work on straightening out his or her own mind, dealing with his or her own defilements, still the results, when they come, don’t just stay within your own mind or within your own body. They should come out in your actions.

When they do, other people will benefit. At the very least, they receive the goodness you’ve developed. Some people are very sensitive to that. It’s even better if they see that you’re a good example.

Take the case of Ajaan Mun. Many people in Thailand during his time were saying that the noble paths and fruitions were impossible, that nobody could do them anymore. But then he, by his own example, proved that what they were saying was wrong. As the word got out, more and more people came to practice with him, and they found that they, too, could develop the noble attainments—after many of them had almost given up, believing that this was not possible anymore.

So the example of one person can be inspiring to other people, reminding them that there are aspects of the human mind, qualities of the human mind, dimensions and capabilities of the human mind, that are a lot more than we tend to think. When these possibilities are opened up to us, that’s a great gift.

So if you can act as a good example to others, showing a level of patience and equanimity and kindness and restraint in your actions beyond the ordinary, that’s going to be a real gift to others. And it might inspire them to try to develop the same qualities within them. This is another way in which goodness gets spread around.