

A Radiant Practice

January 1, 2021

We did the chant just now from the *Maṅgala Sutta*. The word *maṅgala* in Pali can mean both blessing and protection. Prior to the Buddha, it meant little ceremonies that you would do—little rituals you would perform for the sake of blessing and protecting. But he pointed out that the best protection comes from your own actions. The best blessing comes from your own actions.

You notice that his list of blessings and protections has everything from who you hang out with, trying to choose wise people, through helping your relatives, helping your parents, being generous, all the way up to experiencing nibbana and being an arahant. There's no clear dividing line between what's mundane and what's transcendent there. It's all part of a continuum.

That's an important point, because all too often we think that there are two kinds of practice. There's practice for coming back and being happy in the world, what's called merit Buddhism or karmic Buddhism. Then there's nibbanic Buddhism, which aims solely at release. The descriptions usually make it seem as if they're two antithetical types of practice, that you can't do one and the other at the same time.

That's in theory. But when you actually look at the way people practice, even in the forest tradition, there's more of a continuum. Think of the example of the Buddha. He left home to find awakening but he didn't totally abandon the people back home. After he found awakening, he came back. The tradition is that he taught his father to become an arahant. He taught his stepmother to become an arahant. He taught his mother up in heaven to become a stream enterer. He taught his wife to become a stream enterer. He taught his son to become an arahant. He had found a treasure and he wanted to share it.

In the forest tradition, we have the example of the ajaans who teach their parents and family members and, of course, dedicate merit all along the way. Merit is one of those concepts that we tend not to think about too much in Western Buddhism, but it's very important. It's a combination of goodness and happiness at the same time.

As the Buddha said, the phrase, "acts of merit" is another term for happiness. The basic principle of merit operates on the same principle as the four noble truths. In other words, the suffering that weighs down the mind is the suffering that we create for ourselves. The happiness that most uplifts the mind is the goodness we do. That's merit. You're looking for happiness in a way that causes no

suffering to anyone at all. It's something you create from within, so its effects go within. And as with all forms of happiness, the people you're concerned about—people you love, people you have goodwill for—you'd like to share.

Now, the Buddha says there are certain people who are not in a position where they can rejoice in the merit of others and actually benefit from it. But there are a lot who can. So for their sake, we dedicate merit. Think of it as dedicating happiness, dedicating goodness. When you make up your mind that you want to do good to dedicate to others, it makes you more sensitive to the good you *can* do as you go through the day.

There are three big categories: generosity, virtue, and meditation. They cover a lot of different activities. Generosity covers a huge range of activities. Simple things like cleaning up the place, little acts of kindness, anything that makes you feel good that you've gone out of your way to do something good: That's merit. It's the same with virtue. There are areas where you could have said or done something that was not quite honorable, but you said No to that temptation. You decided you wouldn't stoop to that. That means, of course, that if you have to stoop to do something like that, your normal posture should be straight up and something higher.

There's an element of self-esteem in all of this—the realization that, yes, you can create goodness even in difficult situations. You don't have to have things being really nice in order to be good. And the goodness you create really does go much deeper than the happiness that comes from simply having pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas. There's not much self-esteem that comes when you're simply following your desire for sensory pleasures, because you're not creating that kind of pleasure yourself. You're becoming totally dependent on things outside, whereas the happiness of merit is more independent—especially, of course, in the case of meditation.

When the meditation goes well, stop and think at the end: “Who would I like to share this with?” Of course, you can't share the meditation. But the fact that you're dedicating the meditation to someone else: There are those who appreciate that fact, and they're happy for it, for the fact that you've thought of them. That's their merit that they pick up from this. So even though we may be practicing for the sake of getting out of samsara, we still want to leave some good things behind.

That picture of the selfish Theravādin who's simply concerned about release and isn't concerned about the world is a caricature and a very distorted one. It shows very little understanding of the Buddha's teachings on happiness: that when you create happiness, when you create goodness like this, you're not the only one who benefits. What ties both what we call mundane practice and

transcendent practice together is a common thread of goodwill—goodwill for yourself and goodwill for others. When you're meditating, your primary purpose may be your own release, but you're happy to leave some dedication of merit behind. Even with the motivation to want to gain release, one of the factors the Buddha mentions is that if you do gain release, then all the people who have helped you will gain a lot of merit.

So it's not the case that we're doing it just for ourselves. We're doing it for anyone who sees that this is a good thing—sees goodness as a good thing, sees that the happiness created from within is a good thing. Of course, there are people in the world who don't see that. No matter how much you dedicate merit to them, they're not going to sense anything at all. But there are beings out there, people out there, who really do appreciate this, and for them you're happy to share.

Remember even the Buddha couldn't teach everybody. As he said, he's the foremost teacher of those fit to be tamed. Those fit to be tamed are the ones who *want* to be tamed. There are a lot who don't. So even though the Buddha's compassion and goodwill were totally without measure, there were only so many he could help. It's the same with the merit we dedicate. There are only so many we can help, but we're happy to help them. And our own happiness is not diminished that way.

All too often, we talk about somebody getting a lot of merit, making it sound like it's a material thing that you can count. But just think about trying to count happiness. How many happinesses did you experience today? It's not the sort of thing you can count. It's something boundless. Now, there may be greater or lesser intensity in the happiness, but it's not a material thing. An image that's usually used is of lighting a candle. When you light the candle, other people benefit from the light as well. If you take your candle and light someone else's candle, your flame is not reduced, and the brightness around gets increased.

So when you think of merit, think of goodness, happiness, light, the goodness you create within, the happiness you create from within. These things spill out. The same principle applies both for the goodness we do for the world and the goodness we do for gaining release from the world. Think of the Buddha. He gained total release more than 2,500 years ago, and we're still benefitting from what he did. Our personal influence may not be that broad, but it's the same sort of thing.

This is a radiant practice. When you think of it in those terms, it gives you even more energy to do more of it so that the mind becomes a more radiant mind—and so that this human world, which is so full of darkness, can have at least a little more light.