

Warm Your Heart

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Merit is a concept that a lot of Westerners have trouble warming up to, which is ironic. Over in Southeast Asia, it's the warm-hearted part of Buddhism. For most people there, it's their first experience of the Dhamma: making merit together with the family. You know how in horror films they like to start out with a very ordinary group of people doing something pleasant, so that the horror becomes a big contrast? Well, often horror films in Thailand will start with a family going to the monastery to make merit. Everybody's happy and together, doing something that's really good. They feel good about it. And then, when the horror comes, that makes it even more horrible.

So merit is the part of the Buddhist teachings that people warm up to the most.

Part of the problem here, of course, may be simply the English translation of the Pali word *puñña* as "merit." It sounds too calculating. So you can try other translations. You look at the way the word functions in the Pali Canon, and often it's the opposite of evil. So it's "goodness": When you're generous, when you're virtuous, when you develop thoughts of universal goodwill, it's a form of goodness. The Buddha himself offers another translation, when he talks about how acts of merit are another word for "happiness": so, "the happiness that comes from goodness."

But even with the new words, when you look at what the Buddha has to say about goodness and merit—and practicing them as a *skill*—that goes against the grain with a lot of people. They like to think of goodness and merit as being spontaneous, with no calculation, and here the Buddha's talking about developing these things as a skill: thinking about your generosity, thinking about your motivation, thinking about your gift, thinking about who you want to give it to; putting extra thought into your precepts; extra thought into finding the best way to develop goodwill for all beings. It's very much a skill. If you don't like the idea of happiness or goodness as a skill, you're placing a huge block in your way. Because that's what the practice is all about. Happiness is a skill. It is possible to approach it as a skill, and to reach the highest happiness: unbinding. If you don't want it to be a skill, then happiness then becomes something that's random.

Some people like the idea that, when happiness comes, it's totally unearned, totally unexpected. That adds the touch of grace, but it also adds the touch of arbitrariness. There was a book I was given when I was a teenager, *Cosmic*

Consciousness—the first book of comparative religion I ever read. The author talked about his own experience of cosmic consciousness, and he went through different religions, finding evidence that all the great religions have had people who've had moments of cosmic consciousness—when everything opened up and they saw the Oneness of the world, and their belonging to that Oneness. He emphasizes the fact that it was usually spontaneous. He mentioned how Buddhism cultivated cosmic consciousness—at least that's what he thought—and he didn't like the idea of its being cultivated. He said it was too artificial, that grace was part of the wonder. But again, that's placing a huge limitation on human beings: that we have no way of approaching the question of happiness in a skillful way, or making it a skill, or having it as something that's really reliable.

So learn to think about happiness as a skill as a positive thing.

One of the other objections to the concept of merit, or goodness, is that it seems to run counter to a lot of the higher teachings. Higher teachings are about letting go or not-self, whereas this all seems to be about grabbing, acquiring, gaining, accumulating for oneself. And, being impatient, we want to go straight to the top, so we don't want to bother with what we think are lower practices.

But, as the Buddha said, if you don't cultivate merit, you're not going to understand the higher practices. You're not going to have the foundation for them. After all, acts of merit—generosity, virtue, developing universal goodwill—are the first answer to the question that the Buddha says lies at the beginning of discernment, wisdom: “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” Think about the wisdom there: One, you see that happiness is going to depend on your actions. Two, long-term is possible. And three, it's better than short-term.

But as you engage in acts of merit, you learn other lessons as well. It teaches you your power to shape your world, to begin with. You notice, as you observe the precepts, that you become a different person. The world around you becomes a different world. When you're generous, the mind becomes a lot more spacious. You find yourself with better people, with a better relationship to other people. You also get lessons in what the Buddha calls “becoming”: how you shape your identity; how you shape your world through your actions.

A lot of it has to do with your imagination. In some ways, we see this most clearly in generosity, because—of the different forms of merit-making, or goodness-making—generosity offers the biggest range for you to be creative. You can come up with *all kinds* of creative ways of being generous. And the Buddha encourages you: He says, “Give where you feel inspired, where you feel it would do

the most good.” There’s a wide range of gifts that would be appropriate, people it would be appropriate to give with.

He basically says, “If you feel inspired to give to anybody, don’t let anybody get in the way.” But then again, you have to think about it: You have limited resources, limited time. So you might want to think about where would you get the best results for your generosity. This is when it turns into a skill.

That’s where the Buddha has you think about your motivation: Why are you giving? What do you expect to get out of it? The lowest motivation, of course, is just thinking, “I’m going to get this back with interest.” The highest is, as he says, “It’s an ornament for the mind”: something that makes the mind beautiful. And there are many gradations in between.

In terms of the recipient, you want to give to someone who’s free of passion, aversion, and delusion, or to someone who’s working on the path in that direction.

And as far as the gift itself, you want to give in season; something that’s appropriate; something that doesn’t harm you or anybody else in giving. This is all part of making generosity into a skill, as you think about these things, think about their implications, and weigh what you want to do.

Virtue exercises your imagination in learning how to be empathetic. Say you’ve taken the precept against killing, and you’ve got pests in the house. If they’re ants, you have to learn to think like an ant; cockroaches, you have to learn how to think like a cockroach. What is it that’s attracting them? And how can you attract them away?

The practice of goodwill is also an exercise in your imagination. Realize that you can have goodwill for people you really don’t like, and that those are the ones you have to have the most goodwill for. After all, if you can’t have goodwill for them, you’re probably going to do something unskillful around them or to them. That will then become your kamma. So, as your own protection, you’ve got to exercise extra goodwill, reminding yourself of what that means: Their happiness is going to come from their actions, too. So you hope that they’ll try to act in ways that will lead to long-term welfare and happiness. If there’s any way you can contribute to that, to inspire them in that direction, go ahead. If not, that’s when you have to develop equanimity. But you still mean them no harm.

That changes our relationship to the people around us in pretty radical ways. A lot of times, we treat the people we like well; and the people we don’t like, we don’t treat them well. We have to learn how to imagine ourselves as different people. Because after all, these are brahmaviharas: goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity for *all*. We’re lifting our minds above their ordinary

human level, making our minds more expansive. It's in this way that happiness does become a skill.

Now, when you're the recipient of someone's merit, someone's generosity, remember: They're doing that for *their* own happiness. Which is why the proper response is not "thank you"; it's more appreciation, approval that they've chosen such a wise way of looking for happiness. You express your admiration.

So it's a very different dynamic from the way we normally live. Here at the monastery, we're living in what can be called an "economy of gifts." Nobody's doing anything as part of a transaction. It's all people voluntarily trying to develop their merit, trying to develop their goodness, trying to develop their happiness through their goodness. So we express appreciation for one another's goodness.

And when we've done something really good, we can think about dedicating it. People who have passed away, if they have any way of knowing, can express their approval, their appreciation, their admiration. That becomes their goodness; that lifts their minds as well. It refreshes them to think that there's someone who's done good and is thinking about them.

So when you look for happiness this way, you're creating a different kind of world around you, and that's a great lesson in wisdom. Because remember, the ultimate expression of wisdom in the Buddhist teachings is the four noble truths. We're not just here to say, "All things are impermanent, suffering, not-self: Let's just give up on them." Even though they have those characteristics, still we can create something really of solid worth out of them. We can create this as part of the path. Making merit is not the whole path, but it gets you started. Dedicating merit reminds you that you're not the only person who benefits from your being on the path.

So try to warm your heart around this practice, because it does offer a lot of warmth. In those horror films in Thailand, the film usually ends with the family going back to the monastery after the horror has ended. They're back making merit again, and when that happens, all is right with the world. Now, we may not have the whole world making merit, but we can start with our corner. That's our expression of the power of our ability to act, to choose to try to find happiness in a way that's skillful, and do our best to master happiness as a skill.