The Joy of Merit

January 8, 2008

Tonight’s the second night of chanting, meditating, dedicating the merit to Thum Khao, the grandma, Khun Ngai. When you meditate and dedicate the merit to someone else, you want to make sure that your meditation goes well. Make your mind one. It’s not the case that if your mind is all over the place, you’ve got lots of thoughts about lots of different things, that the more thoughts you have, the more merit there’s going to be in the meditation. That’s not the case at all. Think of it as a special kind of fruit down in the grocery store. If they had only one piece of that fruit available in the whole city, you can imagine how much that fruit would cost, how valuable it would be. But if there were thousands of them all over the ground, it wouldn’t have any price at all. So think of your mind in the same way. Have one object. The more you can keep the mind on one object, the more valuable it is. The more it can do for you, the more merit is in it. The word “merit” here is something that people really misunderstand. As the Buddha said, it’s another word for happiness. When you dedicate the merit, it’s not like you’re giving brownie points to someone. You make your mind happy. Then you think of the desire to have other people share in that happiness as well. It’s a special kind of happiness, the happiness that’s meritorious. It doesn’t harm anyone else. It doesn’t harm you. It develops good qualities in your mind, and it’s a good example for other people. So try to develop that sense of ease and well-being with the breath. Enjoy being with the breath. Enjoy exploring the breath. Find ways to create a sense of friendliness between your mind and the breath. As the breath becomes more comfortable, as the way you experiment and interact with the breath becomes more familiar, more enjoyable, that’s merit right there. Then you dedicate the merit to Yom Kippur. Over the past two days, as I’ve been phoning people, people who were touched by Yom Kippur’s life, one thing people kept saying over and over again was how happy she was and how it was an inspiration to see her. Our happiness came from just this, and it was meritorious. She was doing good, and she enjoyed doing good. A lot of it had to do with her sense that what she was doing was skillful. She had learned good skills from the people who came before her, and she wanted to pass them on. At the same time, she perfected her skills. I know that as a cook, she’d already learned how to be a good cook in Thailand, but she came here and you became a good cook. You began to notice that she was also doing American food, Mexican food, Italian food, Indonesian food. Anything new that she saw was a good kind of food. She always wanted to learn how to do it, and she always did it well. It’s because she found joy in the effort of being skillful. This is an important element in the practice. All too often, when we think about effort in the practice, it sounds very straining and very difficult and very tiring. Something wears you out. But that’s not right effort. Right effort is skillful effort. And when it’s skillfully done, it should be nourishing so that you enjoy doing it. The more you do it, the more you want to do it, the more energy you have to do it. That was the kind of example that Grandma set. She had energy inside that relied on her small size and her age. There was something special about her. It was just this, her desire to do whatever she did. She wanted to do it skillfully. So try to approach the meditation, approach your whole life as a skill. In that way, the practice is not just something you do with your eyes closed when you’re quiet. You have to do something skillful, whether it’s moving your hands, opening your mouth to say something. Think of it as an opportunity to do the skillful thing, whatever the situation is. Sometimes it’s easy, sometimes it’s difficult. When it’s difficult, take it as a challenge. And you’ll find there are times when you haven’t done it as skillfully as you want to do. But don’t let that set you back. Just realize there’s more to learn. If you take the attitude that you learn from when you’ve done things well and you learn from when you’ve made mistakes, then everything becomes part of the practice and the effort becomes energizing. Another thing that someone said on hearing that Grandma had passed away was, “That amazing generation is passing away one by one.” The generation of Ajahn Suwat, Yom Kow. They have passed away, but we hope that their example lives on. They showed us how to practice and how to take joy in the practice. It’s up to us to continue in that vein. Remember, the Dhamma is not something that just lives on its own. There are basically two kinds of Dhamma. There’s the Dhamma of nature, which is always there. As the Buddha once said, there are certain things that are there, whether there’s a Buddha or not, to teach them. But then there’s the Dhamma of the teaching, and that depends on people—people practicing it, benefiting from it themselves, being a good example. It’s a good example to other people, so that other people want to practice as well. So we’ve benefited from her example, from the example of the Ajahns. The question is, who’s going to benefit from our example? You don’t have to worry about who, but you have to worry about what kind of example you’re setting. We learn things from an amazing generation. The question is, are we going to be amazing or not? Because if we don’t practice the Dhamma, we’re not going to benefit from it. People won’t see any benefit in it, and that benefits from it. That’s how the Dhamma passes away—the Dhamma of the teaching. So as you practice, remember, it’s not just you who benefit. People around you benefit as well. This is how the happiness, or meritorious happiness, is special. It’s not just for the person who’s enjoying nice sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations. When you enjoy the practice, other people pick up on that as well. It’s infectious. They see, “This is something good.” They can see it in your face, in your actions, in your demeanor, that you’re finding a true happiness inside. And it’s this way that other people get encouraged to practice, too. This is how merit gets spread around. It’s not like, “Oh, that’s good. I’ve got a bank account where you can take money out of your account and put it in someone else’s account.” It’s more like light. We light a candle, and then someone else can light their candle from our candle, and then someone else can light their candle from that person’s candle. The flame of your candle isn’t diminished, but things just keep getting brighter and brighter. That’s why the happiness of merit is so special. Think of Grandma’s example. Think of the attitude that she had. Everything she did, she tried to do in the most skillful way possible. She found joy in that. So see if you can learn how to develop the same sort of joy as well.

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