The Value of Merit

March 13, 2008

Meditation is a meritorious activity, something we tend to forget. We here in the West don’t think that much in terms of merit. The concept of merit is up there with karma. It’s something that Westerners tend to put aside, thinking that it’s unnecessary for the practice. Many of us actually look down on it—people trying to make merit seem selfish and petty, childish. When we think in this way, we’re missing an important part of the practice. Thinking in terms of merit helps develop the right attitude in the mind. The right attitude to your meditation, the right attitude to all your activities throughout the day. As the Buddha said, “Acts of merit are another name for happiness.” So when we do something meritorious—generosity, virtue, meditation—that’s what we’re doing. It should always be in the back of the mind. This is for happiness. This is how happiness is created. Then you can look at yourself. When you’re being generous, are you happy? When you’re being virtuous, in other words, learning how to abstain from unskillful behavior, are you happy? When you meditate, are you happy? If you’re not, maybe your thinking isn’t in line with the action. Maybe your attitude is wrong. This forces you to turn around and look at your mind. When you’re being generous, why wouldn’t you be happy? You might think, “Well, I’m making this sacrifice and other people are not making this sacrifice.” If you see that thought in your mind, dig it out. Question it. Why should your goodness be dependent on other people’s goodness? Why can’t it be enough for you that you have the opportunity to be generous with your time, with your money, with your knowledge? Just the fact of giving your energy is a really golden opportunity. John Lee tells the story of an old woman who, once in her life, happened to go to a monastery. She saw that the walking meditation paths were dirty, so she swept them. Soon afterward, she had a heart attack, died, and became a deva. She wondered, “How did I become a deva?” She thought back to that one time when she swept the paths. She thought, “Maybe there’s more I can do to become an even happier deva.” But a meditating monk with psychic power saw her and chased her away. He said, “You’ve had your chance. While you’re a human being, you had all that time. You could do good, be generous, and you only did it once.” The principle here is that while you’re a human being, you have the opportunity to be generous. You should see that as a really precious opportunity. Whether other people are being generous or not, that’s their business. The fact that you have the opportunity and you’ve got something to give, you should see that as something really fine. Ask yourself, “Do you see it that way?” If you don’t, what’s getting in the way? This is a good way to dig out your feelings of resentment, feelings of selfishness. “I’m not going to give unless anybody else gives. Why aren’t people sharing in the work?” If you make your goodness dependent on other people’s goodness, what kind of goodness is it? In this way, you learn how to reflect. In this way, generosity is not just a means of chalking up brownie points. It’s an opportunity to question some of your attitudes. It’s the same with the precepts. How many people have said, “It sounds like Sunday school rules. We came to Buddhism to get away from Sunday school rules.” That’s not the point of the precepts. The point of the precepts is that you really see the value of learning how to abstain from unskillful behavior, whether it’s behavior in your thoughts, in your words, or in your deeds. You see the fact that you could do something horrible, but you choose not to. You learn how to rejoice in that. As the Buddha said, when you do something harmful, it’s like getting a wound in your hand. Then if poison comes by and you happen to pick up the poison, it can seep into your wound. It can kill you. In other words, when you do harmful things, you’re opening yourself up to harmful things coming back your way. Even when you think in harmful ways, you’re opening yourself up to all kinds of disagreeable possibilities. So when you say no to those thoughts, no to those actions, don’t focus on how much you resent having to abstain or how much you wish you couldn’t or didn’t have to abstain. See the value of saying no and then learn how to get your mind in the right attitude so you’re happy that you said no. This requires some ingenuity on your part, but it’s useful ingenuity because you’re going to need this. It’s a skillful kind of inner conversation to help with your meditation, a conversation that says, “Hey, that was good. You did something good when you were generous. That was good when you abstained from unskillful behavior.” It builds useful thought patterns, useful attitudes in the mind, because when you bring these attitudes to the meditation, it makes the meditation a lot easier. So much of modern meditation instruction has to do with the fact that you’re getting people straight off the street with lots of unskillful habits, lots of unskillful attitudes coming to the meditation. They sit down and the mind doesn’t settle down, and so they can get themselves all tied up in knots. “I’m a horrendous meditator. I’m a real sad case. This is not working. I’m not getting anything out of this.” That’s the important thing, the attitude that you’re not getting anything out of this. If you come from an attitude of generosity, an attitude of virtue, you realize that if you’re going to get something out of the meditation, you’ve got to give. If you want to be happy, you have to learn how to say no to unskillful behavior, which in this case would be a mind that just wanders around while you’re sitting here. If you’ve had experience in thinking in those ways and developing those skills, it’s a lot easier to meditate, and it’s a lot easier to get over the rough patches, because you’ve learned self-knowledge. You’ve learned self-esteem. You’ve learned how to talk to yourself when things aren’t going well, to give yourself encouragement. After all, that’s a lot of what merit is all about, because sometimes the activities are difficult. If you think the work around the monastery here is hard, you should have gone and been in Wat Dhammasattva. John Ford would sometimes say, “Okay, everybody, today is going to be spent building a sidewalk and you spent the whole day building the sidewalk, from right after the meal until whenever it was done.” One time it was 4 a.m., when the work was finally done. We didn’t stop. Sometimes there were activities that didn’t involve the whole community. It was just you. You had to do X while everybody else got to have fun, or so you might think. But if you thought that way, you ended up being miserable, and there was not much merit in your activity. There was once a woman who complained about people who threw trash around the monastery that she had to pick up. John Ford said, “Well, at least you’ve got the opportunity to pick it up. You can still walk. You can still bend over. You can still do these things, and they’re giving you an opportunity to make some merit. You can do it that way.” In other words, when you can think in these healthy ways, and when the time comes to sit down and meditate, and you focus your mind on the breath, and the mind immediately runs away from the breath, you’ve got the right attitude to keep coming back, coming back, coming back, happy that you’ve got the opportunity to sit here with your eyes closed. We’re fortunate we’re not living in Iraq right now, or in Sudan. It would be really difficult to meditate. You have the desire to meditate. There are many countries in the world where people don’t even have the desire to meditate. They’d like peace of mind, but they don’t think that meditation is the way it’s going to happen. So you’ve got some right attitude, some right view. You’ve got the opportunity. Learn to value that. And a good way to get your mind in that frame of mind is to look at life as an opportunity to make merit. Do things that are really skillful and lead to a really solid form of happiness. This is why those teachings on karma and merit that everybody likes to read are so powerful. They’re really important, and if nobody else wants them, you can have them. If they don’t see the value of these things, at least you see the value of these things. One important lesson I learned from my father is that there are a lot of things in the world that people overlook, work that needs to be done, and nobody else is doing it. Look at that as an opportunity. You’re doing something valuable, and you’re not competing with anybody else. So it’s all yours. If you see an area where you can be generous and no one else is helping, well, you can help. If you see that you can sit around and think about all kinds of unskillful things, but you decide, “No, that’s not really going to be happy.” Then you can enjoy whatever the challenge is. Not only to say no to those thoughts, but also to think of interesting new ways to keep on saying no and to pat yourself on the back for learning how to say no. It’s going to be a part of the mind that says, “Well, you say no today, but in five minutes, it’s all going to come back and you’re going to give in.” You say, “I don’t care. I said no just now. That felt good. When five minutes comes, we’ll deal with that in five minutes’ time.” In other words, you learn not to give in to discouraging thoughts. Learn to realize that the concept of merit is not something childish. It’s not something selfish and grasping. It’s an important way to train your inner conversation. Your attitudes, your values. So when you come to meditation, you realize you’re not just here to get something. This is one big difference between Westerners and Thais. When they come to the monastery, Westerners come to get some peace of mind, some quiet time. They get something out of the meditation. Thais come to make merit, which can include meditation, but also includes generosity and the precepts. The basic principle of getting merit is that first you’ve got to give. You learn to be happy to give. It takes a while. It’s a kind of training. It may not come naturally to the mind. But over time, when you learn how to think in this way, you find that it really does help with the meditation. It helps with all aspects of training the mind. It’s only the Arahants who are beyond merit. As long as you’re not there yet, you still need it as part of your training.

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