Merit & Meditation

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When you meditate, you’re doing something meritorious. We in the West don’t like to hear that word, the word “merit.” It seems like a strict accounting version of Buddhism, where you mete out little merit points and try to figure out how you can gain more merit by doing one thing and something else. That’s not the attitude the Buddha encouraged. But he did encourage doing things that are meritorious. As he said, acts of merit are another word for happiness. There are three kinds of merit—generosity, virtue, and the development of the mind through meditation. All those things come in clearly defined units. When we actually look into the tradition of trying to figure out which kind of act has more merit than another kind of act, the canon doesn’t give you any help aside from saying that the merit of virtue is much greater than the merit of generosity, and the merit of meditation is much greater than the merit of virtue. But there’s nothing that tries to calculate merit points. And it’s a good thing, and it’s understandable. On the one hand, karma is really complex. The amount of goodness that comes from one act that one person does at a particular time may be very different from the same act done by another person at another time, or by the same person at another time. A lot of it has to do with the other actions you have. In your karmic background, in terms of receiving the results of the merit, two things stand out. One is your views at the time of receiving the results, and the other is your ability to handle pleasure and pain. And another is your ability to develop an unlimited mind state. In other words, if you have right views, then the results of good actions, whether it be good or bad, will be better than if you have wrong views. And the results of past bad actions will be less, as a general principle. If you’ve developed the ability not to have your mind overcome by pleasure or pain, that means when the results of past bad actions come, they’re not so bad. And when you develop unlimited attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, these can overwhelm the results of past bad actions, and they can augment the results of past good actions. So there’s no strict calculation or tabulation of how many brownie points you’ve made in a particular day by doing something meritorious. And the nature of merit is that it’s a kind of happiness that doesn’t have boundaries. Happiness that comes from material gain, status, praise, sensual pleasures. That creates boundaries. Because when one person gains, another person loses. You gain, somebody else loses. Or they gain, you lose. And when one side is on the gaining side and another person is on the losing side, there’s bound to be a boundary right there. But when you’re generous, what’s the boundary? You’re actually erasing boundaries. You’re giving to someone else. And the happiness that comes from that is something that both sides share. The same with virtue. When you refrain from harming other people, they’re happier, you’re happier. When you meditate, you learn how to develop thoughts of goodwill and allow them to really motivate your actions. Metta is not just a matter of repeating metta phrases in your head. It’s an attitude that’s supposed to motivate your actions. You’re looking for happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. You’re hoping that other people will understand the causes for true happiness. You hope that you’ll understand the causes for true happiness. And you hope that everybody acts on those causes. The world will be a much better place all around. When you’re meditating to overcome your greed, aversion, and delusion, you’re not the only person who’s going to be relieved when those things are weaker. Other people will be relieved as well. So merit is a kind of happiness that doesn’t have boundaries. In fact, it erases boundaries. That’s why there’s the practice of sharing merit. In other words, you stop to think about the fact that this good action you’re doing right now is something that will benefit others. In particular, you can dedicate the merit of what you’re doing to other people. The tradition is that you dedicate it to people who have passed away. There’s a sutta where the Buddha’s talking to a Brahmin who asks him, “This merit that I’ve been dedicating to my ancestors, do they get it?” And the Buddhist says, “If they are hungry ghosts, they automatically get it.” Now notice the Brahmin there was not necessarily a person of right view, nor were the hungry ghosts people of right view. But if he did something meritorious and dedicated it to his ancestors, they would get it. As for other beings, they don’t automatically get it. The only way they can share in the merit is if they learn of what you’ve done and they express their appreciation. I’ve done cases in Thailand of people reporting that they encountered hungry ghosts and visions in their meditation and would dedicate merit to them. In some cases, the hungry ghost would be happy and they’d benefit. In other cases, the hungry ghost had some issues. They didn’t like the person, they didn’t like the person’s teacher. In one case, there was a Buddhist man meditating and there was a hungry ghost of a Catholic nun. She didn’t want any of this Buddhist merit, so that can get in the way. Even the hungry ghosts have to express their appreciation in order to get the merit. So what do you do with people who are alive? You’re going to go up and tell them that you’ve been dedicating merit to them. There are a few cases where you can do that. There are a lot of cases where people give you a funny look. This is why it’s good to spread thoughts of goodwill instead. Again, it’s one of those activities where you benefit and other people benefit. John Lee has a lot to say on the currents of goodwill that spread out into the world. They really do have an effect. Some people are sensitive and will actually pick up on it. And even if they don’t consciously pick up on it, they’ll still do it. There’s a subconscious energy that goes out, and that doesn’t require that you tell them. And at the very least, you benefit because, again, you’re wishing for the happiness of others. It’s good to think about that. What does it mean to wish for the happiness of others? Well, you hope that you will act in ways and speak in ways and think in ways that are conducive to their true happiness. And that thought benefits everybody. This is why the Buddha didn’t have any merit tables or merit charts, because it’s a hard quality to quantify. But it is something you can experience. Sometimes we ask people when they come to see him. “Where have you been making merit?” And usually they’d say, “Well, at this monastery and that monastery.” And he’d say, “Why aren’t you making merit in your heart? Because that’s the only place you’re actually going to see it.” Of course, it’s not something you see with your eyes. It’s something you sense. You feel it. The sense of happiness, the sense of well-being that comes from doing something beneficial and knowing that it’s beneficial. This kind of happiness makes you happy when you think about doing it, while you’re doing it, and after it’s done. It’s very different from lots of other kinds of happiness where sometimes you may have experienced a little bit of happiness while you’re doing something, but leading up to it you know that you’re not acting in quite an honest, straightforward way, or afterwards you realize that you didn’t act in a straightforward way in order to get that happiness. And that happiness is one that can quickly turn into regret. So this is what’s special about merit. It doesn’t turn into regret. Now, you want to be careful to be generous with people that you feel good about being generous with. If you’ve learned that somebody took your generosity and abused other people with it, you’re not going to feel so happy about it. This is why the Buddha said to look carefully. So that your generosity is really beneficial for as many people as possible. But he never says to tell somebody, “Don’t give merit here,” or “Don’t be generous there.” He says if you try to cut off someone else’s generosity, three parties, at least, are going to be harmed. You, yourself, the person who’s going to give, and the person who’s going to receive. This is why generosity, he said, is something totally up to you. King Pasenadi asked him, “To whom should something be given?” The Buddha’s answer was, “Wherever your heart feels inspired, you feel it would be well used.” This is what monks are enjoined to say when someone asks them, “Where should this be given?” They say, “Well, wherever your heart feels inspired, you feel it would be well used and taken care of.” Then there was a question Pasenadi asked, which was, “Where, when something given, gives great results?” And the Buddha said, “Well, that’s a different question. The great results come from looking for people who are either free of passion, aversion, and delusion, or working to be free of passion, aversion, and delusion.” That’s how generosity gives the greater benefits all around. The same with virtue, something you give to all. When you decide you’re not going to kill, you decide you’re not going to kill anybody, intentionally. And then, as the Buddha said, that’s a great gift. The same with all the other five precepts. When your gift is universal like that, you have a share in that universal gift. As for the benefits of meditation? Those are much greater. It’s like the light of the full moon when compared to the light of the stars that we receive here on earth, not counting the sun. You go out on a starlit night and there may be a little bit of light that you can see, but it’s not much. But if there’s a full moon out there, there’s much more. So what we’re doing here is really, really meritorious. It’s creating a form of happiness that spreads out and wipes away boundaries. There’s so little of that kind of happiness in the world that the more you can do it, the better.

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