Merit - the Rewards & Dangers

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Here in the West, when we first hear about karma, a lot of us think about punishment, which is why there’s an instinctive dislike of the teaching. But when the Buddha taught about it, he would start out with the topic of generosity, the fact that when you give, there’s something meritorious about it, which means, one, that you have the choice to give or not to give, and two, that the results last. And why do you have the choice and how do the results last? Well, it’s because of karma, the principle of karma. It’s the gratitude that children should have toward their parents. Because, again, the parents had the choice to raise them or not raise them. And so you have a long-term debt to your parents. Again, it’s because of the principle of karma. That’s why I was pointing out that the idea of karma is related to good things in life. You have the power of choice. You can shape your life through your choices. And the way you shape it can last for a long time, not just this lifetime, but unto others. This is the background for the Buddha’s teachings on merit, the positive ways in which you can shape your life. A lot of us come to Buddhism because of the meditation, but that’s only part of the merit that his teachings have to offer. There are three big topics that he covers. There’s generosity, there’s virtue, and there’s meditation, particularly meditation on goodwill. Each of these types of actions can provide a happiness that’s not just yours. It spreads around. That’s why there are special forms of happiness. As the Buddha once said, “Don’t be afraid of the idea of acts of merit, or don’t overlook it.” It’s another word for happiness. Happiness is harmless, at least relatively harmless. A lot of people can take the teachings and find some way to create harm with them, particularly over the topic of generosity, giving beyond their means, either in terms of their financial means or just the amount of energy they have to give to a project. The Buddha doesn’t want you to overexert yourself in those areas, but it’s interesting that on the one hand, he says that there are some activities that are more meritorious than others, or some types of generosity that are more meritorious than others. In other words, they give better results. But the question is, where should you give? He says that’s totally up to you. Where do you feel inspired? Where do you feel that your gift would be well used and taken care of? In other words, what the Buddha’s doing is he’s putting the shape of your life in your hands. And asking yourself, “Okay, what kind of shape do you want?” I’ve known people who’ve gone overboard, thinking that they’ve hit a real jackpot or something that gives a really high return of interest, which may be true. But what kind of interest do you want? One of the rewards of generosity is wealth. Is wealth always a good thing? It depends on how you use it. Virtue and meditation. Because if you don’t have a strong sense of virtue and if you haven’t trained the mind in really expansive goodwill, generosity can get very selfish. You want this for that, you’re investing this for that. There are people in Thailand that I call merit vultures. They’re constantly on the lookout for Ajahns who are well advanced in their practice when it comes to the idea that you give something to that Ajahn and the results are really large. The results may be large, but what would you do with a lot of wealth? Would you not be destroyed? You look around you and see so many people destroyed by wealth. This is where virtue comes in. The strong sense of how you don’t want to harm yourself, you don’t want to harm others. Killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants—this is a lot safer. But then again, it’s not totally safe, because you can get very rigid in your holding to a particular view, a particular precept, using it to measure your worth against other people’s wealth. That, the Buddha said, is a danger. It’s better to think, one, virtue is a gift to yourself and others. You’re giving safety. And two, it’s a form of medicine for the diseases in your mind, the disease of anger, the disease of carelessness. Just because you’re better or more earnest in taking your medicine than other people doesn’t make you better than they are. You have to remember you’re observing the precepts for the sake of true happiness and for the sake of overcoming these problems you’ve got in your mind. Then there’s the meditation. Goodwill is the main topic that they talk about as a meritorious meditation. In Thailand, it’s the first meditation topic. They teach it to kids. It helps control the virtue and the generosity to make sure that you’re doing these things in ways that are not harmful to yourself and not harmful to others. You want happiness all around. Of course, even then, when there’s goodwill, it needs wisdom. This is why merit on its own is not enough. That’s what Ajahn Fuen calls the goodwill that pulls you down into a well. In other words, you see somebody down in the well and they need your help, and you reach down to help them, and they pull you down. That’s not helping anyone at all. And then, of course, there’s the suffering that comes when you want everyone to be happy, and you look around and you see people doing all kinds of things that are harming others, harming themselves. This is why you need equanimity. And not just equanimity, but equanimity with wisdom. This is why discernment is the most important of all these qualities. It’s not listed as a meritorious quality, but it’s your protection. It’s your inner wealth. It protects the wealth that you’ve created through your good actions. It protects the safety. It protects the goodwill. Because, again, they talk about how when you have goodwill for all beings, you’re attractive to other people. Well, being attractive is not necessarily a good thing all the time. So whatever you do, you have to use wisdom, you have to use discernment. Originally I saw someone get upset that she had given something to the monks and the monks hadn’t eaten it. She was afraid she wasn’t going to get the merit. Well, the fact that she was getting all upset, that was blemishing the merit she already had. Because, remember, merit is a quality of happiness, a quality of sense of well-being. And the fact that you’ve given something, that means that act in and of itself creates a sense of well-being. When you turn around and you get upset that they didn’t take what you wanted or take what you gave, then there’s no happiness there. You get grasping. So the question is, how do you develop merit without grasping at it? And there will be some grasping in the beginning. It’s better than not being meritorious at all. But still, you have to look at the way you’re generous. You have to look at the way you’re observing the precepts. You have to look at the way you’re developing goodwill. Where are the dangers? And use your discernment to develop the right attitude, an attitude that maintains that sense of well-being, the generous heart, the virtuous heart, that doesn’t turn the practice into grasping. That’s when you can get the most out of your merit, learning not only to do it but also to protect it. And then when the good results come, how to use those results wisely. This is why this is a good foundation for the further practice, because it exercises your discernment. It creates good conditions around you and makes it easier to practice. But the primary thing is that it’s exercising your discernment. So you see that even in the good things of the world, there are dangers. In other words, heedfulness is what’s always needed, both to incite you to do meritorious things and to protect them so that your merit doesn’t turn into something else.

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