Appreciating Acts of Merit

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Don’t be afraid of acts of merit, the Buddha once told the monks. Acts of merit are another word for happiness. In other words, the doing of generosity, the practice of virtue, the practice of meditation, particularly meditation on goodwill. These are ways in which we find happiness, and the acts themselves are happy acts. You’re not harming anybody. But you have to appreciate them. Because sometimes you’re generous, especially when you’re generous with your time and your energy, and you see that people around you are not being generous. It’s easy to feel resentful, easy to feel put upon. But you have to resist those feelings. You have to remind yourself that you’re making yourself a better person. It’s good for you. But not just in the sense that saying “beets” are good for you. There’s a joy in doing these things. You have to look for it, realizing that here we are with this human life, and there are so many ways we can find happiness that are harmful to ourselves and harmful to others. It’s rare to find the opportunity where you’re finding happiness and there’s no harm at all. The act of generosity is an act of a large mind, in which you realize you have more than enough, and you’re happy to share. That right there is a kind of happiness. People can be very wealthy but very stingy, and the wealth doesn’t really bring them that much happiness. That’s the people who may not have a lot but they have more than enough. Those are the ones who are happy. So when you’re generous, you remind yourself, “I have more than enough.” It may not be in terms of money, but you do have the energy, you have the time, you’re happy to give of your knowledge. And that enlarges the mind. And a large mind is happiness. The same with virtue. You take other people’s well-being into consideration, and that enlarges your perspective. Sometimes when observing the precepts puts you at a disadvantage with other people, but then you have your virtue as your possession, and you realize how valuable it is. People can pay you millions to lie, but what are you left with? The millions go through your fingers like water. What you’re left with is the karma of lying and also, in the immediate present, just the realization that you’re not really true. And that’s a wound on the mind. And the same with all the other precepts against killing, stealing, illicit sex, taking in drugs, and intoxicants. If you break the precepts, it’s like a wound. Not breaking the precepts is like being unwounded, unscarred, going through life without damaging yourself. And when you reflect on that, there’s a sense of well-being that comes. And more so the development of goodwill. You practice developing goodwill for everybody. People you like, people you don’t like, people you know, people you don’t know. When you realize that you can find happiness through generosity, through virtue, why would you want to harm anybody? When you wish goodwill, what are you wishing? Well, you’re wishing that, to begin with, with yourself. You wish that you would understand the causes for true happiness and be able to act on them. When you’re wishing goodwill to others, it’s the same thing. You’re wishing that they understand the causes for true happiness and act on them as well. And that’s something you can wish for everybody, even people who are behaving in very horrible ways. Especially people who are behaving in horrible ways. If only they could understand what true happiness would be. Then the world would be a much better place. But you can’t wait for them. You start with yourself. You try to understand the causes for happiness and act on them. As the Buddha said, when you make your goodwill unlimited like this, on the one hand, you’re strengthening your resolve not to harm others. This is why we do it. It’s not because other people deserve goodwill. Or deserve our good wishes. But our good wishes are food for our virtue, food for our generosity. They’re a form of restraint. They hold us back when we think of doing something that might be harmful to somebody. You realize it’s not in their best interests. It would not help them find happiness. It’s certainly not going to be a way for you to find happiness. There may be a little bit of pleasure in doing a little harm sometimes. But it’s really not worth it. You look at the reason why you might like doing something like that, and it’s pretty miserable. So when you can say, “No,” that raises the quality of the mind. This is what happiness is. It’s a raised quality of the mind. Even more so, the Buddha says, when you make your mind unlimited like this, it’s like making into a large river of water. If you have any past bad karma, it’s like a lump of salt. If your mind is limited, it’s like putting a lump of salt into a small cup of water. You can’t drink the water because it’s too salty. But if you were to throw it into a large river, you could still drink the water because there’s so much more water than salt. Similarly, your past karma doesn’t get to you in the same way that it would if your mind were limited. So you’re raising the quality of the mind, expanding the quality of the mind, through these actions. And when you appreciate that, and it’s good to reflect on this because sometimes you’re working, working, and working. Other people come in and they seem to be taking advantage of all the good you’re doing. That doesn’t make the good any less good. That good is a quality of your heart. If the quality of your heart is really there, other people might pick up on it. You can’t guarantee that everybody will. But if you train yourself to see the happiness in the goodness you’re doing, people are sensitive and will pick up on it. They’ll be attracted to follow suit. So you’re doing this not only for your own good, but for the good of others. Because that’s what the happiness the Buddha is aiming at. It’s a happiness that erases divisions. It’s a happiness that spreads around. When you’re generous, you benefit. Other people benefit. When you’re virtuous, you benefit. Other people benefit. And the same when you meditate. The usual happiness of the world creates divisions. Happiness gained from material gain or status or relationships. When one side wins, another side loses. It creates a division. But with generosity, virtue, and meditation on goodwill, everybody wins. And it does require, though, that you reflect on this on a regular basis to remind yourself you are developing good qualities in your mind. Your mind is becoming a better mind. It’s more expansive. Its level is raised up so you can see the larger picture and live the larger picture. So it’s good to have some appreciation of the merit that you do, because that appreciation gets plowed back into your ability to do more. At the very least, your own mind becomes a better place to be. You make the world a better place to be. And the benefits keep spreading in and spreading out. So think about that from time to time. There’s a joy in acts of merit. And when you appreciate it inside yourself, it becomes infectious.

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