

A Meritorious Heart

October 31, 2009

Every year at the end of April at Wat Asokaram—Ajaan Lee’s monastery, the monastery where I was ordained—they have a commemoration of his passing away. As part of the commemoration, they invite monks—sometimes forest monks, sometimes city monks—to give a closing Dhamma talk. The very last year I was there before I returned to the States, they had invited a monk from a major city temple in Bangkok. He sent word about five minutes before he was due to get up on the Dhamma seat, saying that he was stuck in traffic, and it looked like it’d be a long time before he could get to the monastery. So they scrounged around and found another monk, a forest ajaan, to get up and give the sermon. The theme of his sermon was that the Buddha’s teachings are about suffering. He went into a fair amount of detail on that point.

Just as he was finishing, the city monk showed up. So they invited him up on the Dhamma seat, and he gave a Dhamma talk, saying that the Buddha’s teachings are all about happiness.

And of course they were both right. You’re not going find happiness unless you understand suffering, and you’re not going to understand suffering unless you understand happiness. The two are very intimately connected.

The reason I bring this up is that over the past century, Western scholars have gone to Thailand and other Asian Buddhist countries to study Buddhism over there, especially Buddhism, as you might say, on the ground. They’d usually start out by reading up on the teachings and would see in the Canon a lot of passages on suffering. Yet they got over there and found the people making merit and very happy about it. Their conclusion was that these people didn’t understand their own religion.

The problem, of course, was that the scholars didn’t understand. When the Buddha talked about suffering, it wasn’t to be pessimistic or depressed or depressing. He was simply pointing out: Here is a problem and here’s the solution. It *is* possible to put an end to suffering. There’s nothing pessimistic about that teaching. In fact, it’s the most positive teaching you can think of. The difficult part, of course, is that you have to do the work yourself. You can’t expect someone to come down and undo your suffering for you, because your own suffering is caused by a lack of skill, and nobody else can make you skillful. They can point out how to become skillful. But the actual energy and attention,

mindfulness and discernment that are needed to develop a skill: Those are things you have to bring to the practice.

So there is work involved, but it's good work. This is why people are happy to do it. In Thailand, they have the phrase, *jai boon*, which literally means someone with a meritorious heart, someone who enjoys doing the practice, enjoys doing good. Because that's where a lot of the connection is. The practice is not just meditation. It's how you approach your life as a whole, realizing that, yes, there is suffering in life, but there is a way out. And, yes, that way out involves effort, but the effort involves a lot of good things. So you're happy to do the practice. You're happy to make the effort.

There are three basic elements in developing a meritorious heart. One is generosity, a willingness to give. This means not only giving material things but also giving of your time, giving of your energy, giving of your knowledge, giving your forgiveness.

An important part of making that effort in being generous is to learn how to be happy about it, to want to do it. It's not simply a chore that you get out of the way. But you see the positive effect that comes from it, and not just a positive effect many years down the line. The state of mind you create right now by being generous is an expansive state, one that's willing to give what energy you have. You're not resentful of whatever effort is involved. It's not right effort when you're resentful as you do it. You learn how to enjoy it, and you keep reminding yourself of what a good thing it is to be generous, to have more than enough, and to act on that sense of more than enough, realizing that what you give is given in total freedom.

This is an important principle in the teachings: that what we give is given in freedom. It's an expression of freedom. Probably as a child your first sense of your own freedom was not in your ability to disobey your parents, which was simply giving in to a particular unskillful emotion or unskillful attitude. It was the moment when you realized that you're free to give something. You were under no compulsion, but you wanted to give.

So as you give, keep reminding yourself: This is an expression of freedom. You're not tied down to material things. You're not tied down to the things you have in other areas. Your knowledge doesn't improve by holding it back. Your wealth doesn't improve by holding it back. Your forgiveness doesn't improve by holding it back. It improves by giving it. And the mind improves by giving, too.

Similarly with the precepts: You realize that your actions have power. You have the power to help. You have the power to harm. So you see that in any way where your actions could be harmful, you learn how to hold back, you learn how

to say no, even though you may feel that “This is what I want to say, this is what I want to do, how I want to express myself.” If you see that it’s harmful, you say, “No. I want to be freed from that compulsion. I want to show that I have some maturity.” Again, this is an aspect of freedom. And you learn to appreciate it. This is what it means to have a meritorious heart.

Now, the two practices of generosity and virtue are nurtured by the third form of merit, or the third expression of the meritorious heart, which is the development of an attitude of universal goodwill, the desire for everybody to be happy, realizing that if you’re the only person in the world who’s happy and nobody else is happy, it’s be a miserable state. You couldn’t really be happy without knowing that you had spread some happiness around. You can trust your desire to be generous and virtuous only if you’re able to develop an attitude of goodwill for everyone, wishing that all beings be happy.

This, of course, doesn’t mean that you’re going around hoping that everybody’s going to be happy no matter what they’re doing, skillful or unskillful, because you know that unskillful activity doesn’t lead to true happiness. What universal goodwill means is that you hope all people will avoid unskillful behavior and learn how to develop skillful behavior. You’d be happy to see everybody being generous, you’d be happy to see everybody being virtuous and having an attitude of goodwill for all. You hope that people will understand these principles and act on them.

When you see people who are suffering from unfortunate circumstances, it’s not simply that you have to leave them there. You feel compassion for them and then you try to act on that compassion in whatever way you feel inspired to act. If you see someone is already happy, you’re not resentful of their happiness. You’re not jealous. You hope that they continue learning how to maintain their happiness. As for people who are suffering, you hope that they learn how to deal with the situation and not suffer. And you develop equanimity in areas where things can’t be changed, accepting the fact that there’s a lot of unskillful karma going around in the world, so there are going to be some negative consequences there. Or when things have already happened that were unfortunate, you have to have equanimity about them. The next question is: What do you do about them, so that things don’t keep making a downhill slide?

As you develop this attitude and try to apply it to everyone, it’s a useful exercise to then ask yourself: “Is there anyone for whom I really don’t feel goodwill, anyone that I really would like to see suffer?” Probably a few faces will come up in your mind, so you’re going to have to ask yourself, “What would I really gain from that person’s suffering? What would the world gain from that person’s suffering?” Nothing, really. Usually, the more people suffer, the more

they tend to lash out at the world, and that doesn't help anything. It's a rare person who suffers and then, reflecting on that suffering, develops the conviction that's needed to get on the path. So you see that there is suffering out there, and you hope that people will develop the conviction that will allow them to get beyond their suffering, but you don't want to wish suffering on people.

Then as you work through any limitations on your goodwill, you find that the mind develops an even greater sense of expansion that it can even with generosity. After all, your generosity has its limits. There's only so much you can give in terms of your wealth, your material things, your energy, your time, because your time is limited, your energy is limited. But goodwill doesn't have to be limited at all. And as you develop that larger sense of goodwill, the Buddha says you develop an unlimited mind. That unlimited mind, he said, is like a large river. If you threw a huge lump of salt into the large river, you could still drink the water because the river is so much larger. Very different from putting that same lump of salt into a little cup of water: The water would be way too salty to drink.

So you want to develop this expansive, enlarged state of mind because that's what it means to have a meritorious heart, wishing goodwill for all, wishing that all people be happy, and then *you're* happy to make whatever effort you can to be generous, to be virtuous, to enjoy this aspect of the path even though there are difficulties.

Tomorrow we're going to see quite a lot of them. Large numbers of people are coming, and you have to have some equanimity about the fact that all kinds of things are going to happen. But you want to maintain that sense of expansive goodwill for everyone who comes. Because as you give goodwill to all beings, as you're virtuous when you're around all beings, you give universal protection to the world, the Buddha says, and you have a share in that protection. Regardless of the circumstances outside, as long as you can maintain this expansive heart, this meritorious heart, whatever unfortunate things happen are like a lump salt in that huge river of water.

So this is the attitude you want to bring, not only tomorrow, but also to all of your activities, because this is the attitude that provides the proper context for the practice of meditation. As you go beyond the practice of goodwill into focusing on the breath, developing mindfulness, developing concentration, it's all best done with this attitude of a meritorious heart, a heart that wishes happiness for all, wishes *true* happiness for all.

This is why we meditate. This is why we practice to begin with. We want a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. We want a happiness that has no limitations. And to taste that unlimited state, that unlimited heart, you start out

by training it to be a meritorious heart, one that has no limits on its goodwill. So tomorrow it might be tested, but it's only when things attested that you know that they're genuine. So be happy for whatever opportunities you have to do good.