

Dedicating Merit

September 28, 2015

There are two ways of looking at consciousness. One is from the outside. We look at other people, other beings, and their consciousness seems to be dependent on their bodies. Without their bodies, we would have no sense of their consciousness. When the body dies, their consciousness seems to disappear. In this view, the body comes first and consciousness comes after. If you want to make a change in consciousness, it has to come from a change in the body.

The other way of looking at consciousness is to look at it from the inside. In other words, you're here, conscious, and your awareness comes first. Your awareness of the body then comes after, and the world outside after that. And as we try to make changes in our consciousness, we realize that although some things may come in from outside, a lot of the changes come from within.

This second point of view is the one from which the Buddha's operating. You don't solve the problems of consciousness by changing the chemicals of the body. You solve the problems by understanding consciousness from inside, what your intentions are, what your perceptions are, the questions you ask, how you can change these things. All this is consciousness changing itself from within. In this case, consciousness is prior. If it weren't, meditation wouldn't be doing anything useful at all. But it is doing something. It's changing our minds.

And as the Buddha said, at the end of life, when the body no longer provides a place for the consciousness to stay focused, it can go on. Craving is its bridge to another body. And of course, craving depends on consciousness. Consciousness depends on craving. The two of them, as long as they supporting each other, can keep going on indefinitely. And the currents of consciousness can go outside the body. They can do things that a normal materialist wouldn't imagine.

This is one of the things you learn as you practice. There's more to the mind than just looking at the outside would tell you.

Several years back I gave a Dhamma talk at a meditation center. I talked about karma, and during the Q&A got into issues of rebirth. And the following week, the teacher at the center decided he had to do damage control. So he explained that poor Than Geoff went to Thailand when he was young and impressionable, and picked up a lot of things over there. He didn't sort out the differences between true Dhamma and Thai culture, and so he mixes rebirth up with the Dhamma. Actually, I've always felt the fact that I was there from an early age was not a handicap at all. It was being there when I was still receptive, and being around the ajaans, and other people practicing meditation, that I began to realize that there's more to the mind than Western materialistic ideas can account for. And one of the things about the mind is this notion of the current of the mind. The mind is constantly sending out currents. When the

mind is really concentrated, those currents can be focused and strong. If you send currents out to other people, and if those people are sensitive, they can pick them up.

One evening when I was meditating, and I happened to think about one of the supporters of the temple. She was going through a bad time, and so I sent some metta in her direction. The next day, she came to the monastery and said, "Did you send metta to me last night?" She felt it, and she knew where it came from. So these aspects of consciousness: At the very least, leave your mind open to their being possible. One of those possibilities is that, because consciousness doesn't end with the death of the body, you can effectively send the current of your goodwill to people who have passed away.

A brahman once went to the Buddha and asked him about the brahmanical tradition of making merit for dead ancestors. His question was, do the dead ancestors get receive the merit? And the Buddha said, "If they're in a position where it's possible for the merit to go to them, they will." And that possible position was the realm of the hungry ghosts. Now this can be seen as something of an insult to the brahmans. They called their ancestors *peta*, which originally meant "father," and now when the Buddha talked about *peta*, he was portraying them as hungry ghosts: beings that, after they died, wander around, hungry, with very little source of food aside from the merit that's dedicated to them.

The brahman then asked, "Well, what if I don't have any ancestors who are hungry ghosts? And the Buddha replied, "Everybody has ancestors who are hungry ghosts."

So think about that. When you're meditating here, you're making merit and you can share it. The act of sharing is a meritorious act in and of itself. You might say that it gives you compound interest on top of the good you've done. And the question, of course, is: how can something that you've done have an impact on somebody else? The answer is that they have to appreciate it. That appreciation is a meritorious act on their part. They have to be in a position where they can receive it, and then feel some appreciation for the goodness you've sent in their direction. The hungry ghosts tend to be sensitive to this, which is why they're in a position where they can receive this.

When I first went to Thailand and first met Ajaan Fuang, it was shortly after my mother had passed away, and the dedication of merit was one of the first things he taught me. Every night, after your meditation, he said, dedicate the merit of your meditation to your mother. Of course, then it expands out. They talk a lot about making merit and then dedicating it to the people to whom you have karmic debts: people who have been good to you, people who deserve your gratitude. And it's a good exercise to sit down and make a list. Who are the people who've taught you things? Who are the people who've gone out of their way for you? Teachers, friends, relatives, or not-relatives. And then dedicate your merit to all of them. Doing this expands your mind, and it sends good currents out. Whether or not you can follow the currents and check on the recipients, it's always a good attitude to say to yourself, "I'm just going to spread it out, regardless." After all, there are some hungry ghosts who are receptive,

and others who are not.

I think I've told you the story about Maha Kwan. He was a monk at Wat Makut who was very deeply into the Buddha image business. People would come from different parts of Thailand with Buddha images, or parts of Buddha images: heads, hands, or whatnot. And they would come around 2, 3, 4 am. No questions were asked as to where they got these things. If it was a head, no question was asked, did you cut off the head someplace? Maha Kwan had money in his drawer. People could take the money, and then he had arrangements that—I don't know exactly how many intermediaries there were—eventually got these Buddha images and parts of Buddha images on to the international art market. So who knows? When you go to a house here in America, and maybe a Buddha head is on the coffee table, or a hand or something, it may have gone through Maha Kwan.

At any rate, he was off in an isolated part of the monastery. There were no other monks living nearby—and he liked it that way. When Ajaan Fuang was invited to go to Wat Makut to teach meditation, the abbot arranged for him to live in the second story of same the building where Maha Kwan was living in the first story. Maha Kwan didn't like having anyone else there, especially with Ajaan Fuang being a meditation monk. Who knows? He might be up meditating at 2, 3, 4 am. So Maha Kwan did everything that he could to get rid of Ajaan Fuang.

Ajaan Fuang stayed on for three years, and then was invited out to Wat Dhammasathit. Shortly after he left Wat Makut, Maha Kwan was found stabbed to death, and then nobody would live in the building after his death, for fear of the ghost.

A couple of years later, Ajaan Fuang was invited back to Wat Makut to teach meditation, and found himself back in the second story of that same building. As he was teaching meditation, every now and then one of his students would report a vision: There's this bloody monk wandering around the building. They had no idea who it was. They hadn't heard the story about Maha Kwan. They didn't know anything about it. Ajaan Fuang would always say, "Well, dedicate the merit of your meditation to him." So they'd sit for a few minutes, and in every case, the answer would always come back, "He won't take it!" Some grudges get carried past the grave.

So it's not the case that all hungry ghosts are receptive. But given that we all have dead relatives or dead friends who are probably hungry ghosts, it's good to dedicate our merit to them. There's always the possibility that it could give them the nourishment they need.

There are other stories about hungry ghosts that I reported in *Awareness Itself*. Ajaan Fuang had a student who suddenly found herself seeing a lot of hungry ghosts in her meditation. I think there was a Dhamma inspiration for this, because she herself prior to that had been practicing magic. She insisted it was white magic, but you never know. And people who've practiced magic tend to believe that the doctrine of karma doesn't apply to them. So all of a sudden, as she was meditating, she saw all these people who were suffering from having done bad karma in one way or another. It was a good lesson in karma for her. When she first

started seeing these things, she didn't want it to happen. She asked Ajaan Fuang how she could become un-sensitive, insensitive to these things. But his reply was "There are good lessons to learn, and also good things you can do for them."

So he told her, "Whenever you see a hungry ghost, first ask it what it did to put itself in that position. Then dedicate the merit of your meditation to them, in case they might be in a position to receive it and benefit from it." So she found that, as she would ask these questions, they were very honest in saying, I did this, I did that. But she also found that after dedicating the merit of her meditation to them, some of them would actually change from their status as a hungry ghost to something much better—but others would not. They were not yet ready.

This is why, as I said this afternoon, there's no expiry date on how long you can dedicate merit to somebody after they've died. There doesn't come a point where they can't receive it anymore. In some cases, their karma doesn't allow them to pick up on a dedication of merit for a while. If they're in a position where their karma allows it, when they're sensitive to it, and they're appreciative, then the merit does go to them—because they make merit in their act of appreciation.

So remember that the ways of consciousness are a lot more subtle—and contain a lot more possibilities—than our normal Western upbringing would allow for. It's also helpful to remember that we're here in a large fabric of interconnected people: people who we've depended on, people we've benefitted from, and now we're in a position to benefit them in return. The attitude that's willing to benefit others is an important nourishment for your own concentration.

This is why dedicating merit is good for you, too. It broadens your mind, makes you more appreciative of the goodness that you've received from others, and of the possibility to pass that goodness on. And it gives further motivation to put more effort into the practice. Sometimes you may say, "Well, that's enough for me tonight," but then you can ask yourself, "Is this enough for all the people I'd like to help?" Push things a little further so that you have enough goodness—not only for yourself, but also enough to pass around.