

## *Appreciating Merit*

*December 24, 2018*

There's that chant we have at the end of every chanting session: "Through the power of all the Buddhas, all the Dhamma, all the Sangha, may you forever be well." What is that power? Where does it come from? The Buddha gained his power from his generosity, his virtue, and his meditation, developing concentration, developing discernment all the way to nibbana. As did the Sangha. And the Dhamma teaches us that this is where you derive good power in your mind, the power by which you'll be well. In other words, when you follow the Buddha's example in those three activities, that's how the power is going to have an influence on your life.

Here in the West we often start out with meditation and then after a while we learn about the precepts and then we learn about generosity. You go to a retreat, the first thing they teach you is meditation, and then they say, "Oh, by the way, we also have to have precepts." And then at the end they hit you with a generosity talk.

Which is not how the Buddha did it. The practice starts with generosity, the idea that you're not going to be just holding everything for yourself, but you're happy to see other people happy as well. That means you're willing to give up a little of your comfort, some of your wealth, other things that you might be able to hold onto but you decide, "No, I want to share this with somebody else." That mind state provides the basis for everything else. Because after all, we're looking for a happiness that doesn't harm anybody, and a happiness that can give. It has to start with generosity. It's one of the reasons why the Buddha said that a stingy person can't get into jhana, and certainly can't reach the noble attainments.

But the Buddha's attitude toward generosity is interesting. In some religions they teach you, "Don't be proud about your goodness because it doesn't really come from you." It comes from some creator god or something. But the Buddha's attitude is not that way at all. He says to be proud of the fact that you've been generous. See that as a really good thing, as something you'd like to share. That's what dedicating merit is all about. You give, then you think of the fact that you're going to be benefitting from this, and then you'd like to share that benefit with somebody else, too. That makes the mind even more generous, even more inclined to think of others. In fact, this practice of dedicating merit lies at the basis of goodwill—the idea that you'd like to spread your happiness around.

But first it has to start simply with appreciating the happiness that comes from a harmless action. You want to hold that in mind. Often when people are suffering from addictions, one of the things they're taught is on an evening or a day or a night when you don't give into your addiction, then the following morning you should remind yourself how good you feel from having not given in. Hold that sense of happiness in mind to remind yourself the next time around. That strengthens your resolve that you're not going to give in the next night or the next night, because you realize it really feels good when you haven't given in. You start thinking about the long term, not just what you feel like right now. You think about the long term of how you would feel the next morning and on to longer periods of time.

The same principle applies to all the practices that count as merit. Remind yourself of how good it feels that you can be generous, how good it feels that you can be virtuous, that you can have the time and make the effort to meditate. That'll make you more inclined to want to do more of it. At the same time, you grow more and more appreciative of this happiness that doesn't harm anybody. You want to make it greater and you want to make it more harmless.

Now, nibbana's the only thing that's totally harmless. Even when we're sitting here doing concentration we require a body that has to feed, so there's going to be some oppression of some beings. If you eat meat, that would include the beings who provided the meat. If you don't eat meat, that would include the beings who have to provide the food for you, work in the fields, work in the factories, deliver the food, fix the food. You can't really say you're harming those people but if there were one less mouth, life would be easier for them. Nibbana has no mouths, doesn't need to feed on anything at all. So as you appreciate the idea of a happiness that doesn't have to harm anybody, it starts with generosity and ends with nibbana. This is why Luang Puu Dune said, "The practice is one thing clear through."

So as you're working on the precepts, dealing with the rules—whether you're following the five or the eight precepts or the 227 rules in the Patimokkha, or all the many, many more rules that the monks have to follow—remind yourself that it's good to be able to live in the world in a relatively harmless way. Try appreciate that every day as you're doing it. That's something that's easy to forget when it happens every day. Think about how good it is to live in a society where other people are trying to observe the precepts, too. Even though there may be disagreements and personal issues, the fact that everybody is abiding by the precepts makes it so much nicer to live together. We should have appreciation for that.

And think: Wouldn't it be nice if more people appreciated that. That's what the dedication of merit is all about. Merit is not a quantity or material thing that you can send out to people. It's a quality of the mind: the sense of well-being that comes from appreciating a happiness that's harmless, from doing things that lead to a happiness that's harmless. Sometimes the texts talk about some activity making a lot of merit or a little bit of merit, but it's not the kind of thing you can really measure. The Buddha does make comparisons, but how can you measure your merit against somebody else's?

The best thing to do is measure it against your own attitude: Do you feel a sense of well-being as you meditate? Now it may be frustrating sometimes. Your meditation is nothing but the mind wandering off and your having to pull it back, it wanders off and you pull it back. Well, the fact that you're pulling it back is a good thing. As the Buddha said, even one moment of a skillful thinking generates a lot of merit. One moment of goodwill, even just the amount of a finger snap, generates a lot of merit. So learn how to appreciate these things, nurture them. Think of them as little seeds that can grow into large trees if you take care of them.

So have a sense of appreciation. That's probably the best translation for the word *anumodana*. When we dedicate merit to others, they're supposed to have a feeling of anumodana, appreciation of the fact that, "Yes, there is someone doing good in the world and they were thinking of me." They appreciate that. But the important thing is that they appreciate the fact that someone's doing good in the world: There are people who meditate, there are people who are generous, there are people who are virtuous. It's good to learn how to appreciate that. And then you look at yourself, "That's something I can do, too." Then when you do it, learn how to appreciate it. The more you can appreciate it, the more merit you get and the more you have to share.

When you practice generosity, virtue, and meditation—and when the Buddha talks about the merit of meditation, he's thinking primarily of meditation on the theme of goodwill—when you dedicate the merit of that to others, wishing for them to be happy, you're basically wishing for *them* to be generous and virtuous and to develop attitudes of goodwill, too. Then you ask yourself, "How can I help?" When you're extending goodwill for others, it's not a matter of thinking that your thoughts of goodwill are going to be magical and make everybody happy just as they are. Because there are a lot of people out there for whom you think, "Well, I'd rather not they'd be happy just as they are," because they're not being virtuous, they're not being generous, they're not trying to get any control over their minds. But as you come to the practice of goodwill with an appreciation of

generosity and virtue, then you realize, “Oh, this is what we’re wishing for: that other people do this as well.”

So learn to appreciate generosity and virtue, both when other people dedicate it to you and when you’ve developed it for yourself. Because that multiplies the merit even more, multiplies the sense of well-being even more.

Because it’s good to know that your happiness doesn’t have to depend on oppressing anybody. You always wonder about those people who can live in palatial places that are based on oppression: How can they be happy? You don’t need to live in a palatial place to be happy. The best thing to make yourself happy is to know that your well-being doesn’t depend on harming anybody at all. That’s a happiness that feels good deep down inside. And remind yourself, that’s what you’re working on right now.

This is how the Buddha developed his power. It’s wasn’t just ordinary Sunday-school niceness. There’s a power that comes from the goodness that can sustain the mind, can sustain your well-being and spread it around to nurture the well-being of others. It’s good all the way through.

So when the practice gets dry, this attitude of appreciation helps to give it a little more moisture, helps to lubricate it. Ajaan Fuang used to say that our practice needs lubrication just as an engine needs a lubricant. With the meditation, of course, it’s the lubricant of the refreshment that comes when the mind is settling in. Prior to that, it’s the lubricant that comes from appreciating the goodness, the happiness that doesn’t have to depend on harming anyone.

So learn how to generate thoughts of appreciation and don’t be afraid to pat yourself on the back when you’ve done something good. Because that’s the way in which you can encourage yourself to do *more good*, to the point where you can develop the kind of power that the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha have. After all, the possibility of becoming part of the Noble Sangha is open to everybody. So take advantage of this opportunity now.