

The Wisdom of Merit

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Many of us come to the Buddhist practice because of the meditation. It's what's distinctive about what the Buddha taught, which means that we many times miss out on some of the other aspects of what the Buddha taught: generosity, virtue, the practice of developing merit. Because at first glance it seems as if the Buddha has nothing new or distinctive to offer on these topics, and so we miss out on some important aspects of the practice. The Buddha often began his discussion of the practice with the topic of giving, the topic of virtue. These provided the foundation for working up eventually to an understanding of the four noble truths.

And so it's good to look back and see what's distinctive about giving from his point of view. And particularly at why the practice of generosity and virtue and merit in general are an important foundation for practicing meditation—particularly the teachings on merit. A lot of us don't like the word "merit" because it sounds like we're trying to chalk up Brownie points. There seems a lot of grasping and calculating in the practice of merit, a lot of selfing.

But the selfing is just the point. Even though ultimately the practice is about letting go, the path is not just letting go. The letting go involves some developing as well. And that includes developing a skillful sense of self.

You learn this first from the practice of giving. You learn this from the practice of virtue. When the Buddha teaches letting go, he doesn't tell you to let go of everything all at once, or that all desire is bad, or even that your sense of self is bad. As he explains it, you have to develop skillful qualities, let go of unskillful qualities, and only when the skillful qualities are mature can you let go of those as well. Or as a modern Buddhist psychologist once said, you have to develop a healthy sense of self before you can let go of self.

And the practice of generosity and virtue develops precisely that healthy sense of self. It gives you a skillful sense of what things to hold onto, what things to let go of.

You can see this in the way the Buddha teaches these things. He doesn't tell you to be generous because you have to be generous, that you have some sort of obligation to other people to give them gifts. After all, who was the Buddha to tell us what we have to do? He didn't create us. He's not our father. But his reasons for speaking this way go deeper than that. He wants to point out to us that we do have freedom of choice. And in generosity we begin to gain a sense of that

freedom. We have something, we have more than enough, and we have the choice of whether to keep it or give it away. We're free to say No to our greed.

He wants us to focus on that element of choice each and every moment. And so on what do we base our choice? What motivates us to give? Realizing that it's going to be for our own welfare, both now and down the line. Notice that he doesn't tell us to give because it's our innate nature to be nice, or our innate nature to be compassionate. He's appealing to another quality called heedfulness: the realization that our actions really do make a difference. And we have to be very careful, because sometimes the things we like to do give rise to suffering, and things we don't like to do can actually lead to happiness.

So when he tries to motivate us to be more generous, he points out that we really do benefit in terms of our own self-respect, our own state of mind, and in the way other people regard us.

The same with virtue: We benefit now and on into the future in terms of self-respect, in terms of our sense of self-control, and in terms of how other people respect us. In psychological terms, this is called anticipation. It's a healthy ego function. Now, again, we may have heard that Buddhism is against ego, but it's not against ego. Maybe against selfishness, maybe against stupidity and all the other things that we tend to associate with a very unskillful ego, but there is skillful ego functioning as well. Anticipation means seeing that your actions do have results, and so you want to be very careful about what you do. Right there the Buddha's teaching us some important things about kamma, that we have the freedom of choice, but that we also have to be careful because our actions have results both in the present moment and down the line.

So even just the way he teaches the development of merit is teaching some of the important lessons about wisdom.

And in the practice of generosity, he teaches us something that's counterintuitive to us when we were little children—that by giving something away we're going to be happy. But if we do it often enough, we begin to see that it's true. The act of giving things away helps to erase the sense of boundary between you and others. It helps you to see that it is possible to develop a happiness where both sides benefit. Happiness is not a zero-sum game. Your ability to help other people to be happy, to help other people to enjoy well-being, contributes to your well-being as well. This realization is called altruism. Again, it's another healthy ego function.

As for virtue, you realize that by saying No to yourself—and you have to learn how to say No skillfully by holding to certain principles, by making promises to yourself that you're not going to be harmful—this develops a strong sense of well-

being, too. In psychological terms, this is called suppression. It doesn't mean repression. Repression is when you deny that you have unskillful impulses. Suppression means simply realizing you've got some unskillful impulses but you learn how to say No to them. You learn how to hold them in check.

So when you exercise your freedom to be generous and virtuous, you're developing good qualities in mind that will hold you in good stead as you meditate. Through generosity you bring a more spacious sense of mind to the practice. You have a sense of inner wealth. Because that's what generosity is all about: You realize you do have the wealth to share. When you see the good that comes from giving, then when you come to the meditation, your first question is not, "What am I going to get out of this?" Your question is, "What can I give to get the best results out of this?" You're more willing to give of your time and effort. That sense of spaciousness and wealth helps carry you over the rough patches in the meditation.

As for the practice of virtue, that teaches you to hold onto certain principles, that you don't want to do anything unskillful. So you start bringing that set of principles into the mind. You've learned how to say No to yourself. And hopefully as you practice virtue, you realize it's important how you say No to yourself skillfully, so that you're not just bottling yourself up. You actually see the advantages that come from making a promise to yourself and holding to it, i.e., holding on in a skillful way.

When you do this, you develop mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is keeping your promise to yourself in mind. Alertness is actually looking at what you're doing. These are good qualities to bring to the meditation, things you want to hold onto as you develop concentration. And you realize that in developing concentration, just the fact that you hold onto your object doesn't mean that you're clinging in an unhealthy way. It's a skillful holding on, because you're developing something good. You're developing stronger concentration, stronger mindfulness, because you're going to need these qualities of mind in order to let go in a skillful way.

As Ajaan Lee once said, the Buddha never taught us to let go like paupers, i.e., letting go and having nothing left. Letting go is done in stages. You develop a healthy sense of self before you let go of your total sense of self. And in developing a healthy sense of self, you learn how to let go, in the meantime, of unhealthy ways of identifying yourself. When an impulse comes up, you ask yourself, "Is this skillful? Is this not?" If it's not skillful, you learn techniques for letting it go, putting it aside. By holding onto the healthy sense of self, the Buddha says, you learn to care about the results of your actions. You hold onto the sense of wealth

you develop through your generosity, the sense of self-esteem that comes from knowing that you've helped other people and that you've avoided harming them.

So the Buddha doesn't have you let go of anything until you no longer need it. And your sense of self, if it's well-trained, can carry you through quite far. You use it in getting the mind into concentration, realizing that you will benefit and the people around you will benefit. So you hold onto the object of your concentration.

Meanwhile, you learn that you're developing generosity and virtue, not because they make you better than other people, but because they make you happy. And you want to bring that same attitude to the meditation. As the Buddha said, it's a sign of a person of no integrity if you're proud of your attainments. You've gained this level of jhana, that level of jhana. "Other people don't have that level of jhana. I'm better than they are." That's an attitude you want to let go of. That's an unhealthy sense of self. You're doing the concentration because it leads to a strong sense of well-being.

And the fact that you have it and other people don't, that's irrelevant. Because each of us has to work on our own states of mind, each of us has to work on our own progress in the training, but we're doing it not to be better than other people. We're doing it because this is how true happiness is found—a happiness that doesn't harm you, a happiness that doesn't harm other people.

This, too, is a lesson that you learn from generosity. As the Buddha said, a person of integrity gives gifts in a way that doesn't adversely affect himself, doesn't adversely affect anybody else. In other words, you don't give until it hurts. You don't steal from other people so that you can give to this or that person. You look at what you can give in a harmless way.

So lessons from the practice of merit are really important. We read about generosity. We read about virtue. We say we know all about that. We've heard about these things many, many times from our parents. Well, the way the Buddha approaches the topic is very instructive. And the lessons we can learn for ourselves as we develop these qualities in our own hearts and in our own actions are really instructive, too. It's a shame that these topics get short shrift in most discussions of Buddhist practice. Everybody seems to be in a hurry to get on to the higher levels. But the lessons you learn as you develop these preliminary levels really are crucial. They carry all the way through.

So when you talk about practicing, remember it's not just practicing meditation. It's also practicing generosity, practicing virtue in daily life. At the end of the retreat that Ajaan Suwat taught at IMS, someone asked him, "How do we carry over the practice of meditation into daily life?" And Ajaan Suwat said,

“You start with the five precepts.” Some people got upset. They thought he was talking down to them, that he didn’t realize that lay people were capable of more than the five precepts. But that wasn’t the implication. The implication was that these precepts are an important part of the practice. These are an important part of meditation because they teach you these crucial lessons about what you hold onto so that you can let go skillfully.

As I said, the Buddha doesn’t teach you to let go of anything until you’re ready to let go, until you no longer need it. Your sense of self will take you far. There comes a point, though, when you don’t need it anymore. That’s when you let it go. In the meantime, you’ve learned that there are unskillful ways of identifying yourself, so you let those go because they don’t serve any real purpose. As for other ways of identifying yourself, you notice how far they can take you. When they’ve taken you as far as they can, then you can let them go so that you can move further.

It’s when you understand this principle that your practice becomes mature.