

A Post-goodness World?

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I was reading a piece today where the author was saying that the idea of merit was invented sometime in the early centuries of Buddhism as a way of getting people to donate to monasteries. Now that we live in a world where people no longer believe in kamma, no longer believe in rebirth, nobody's going to believe in merit, so we need to find new ways of financing Buddhist institutions: the sort of reasoning that people who like to privatize things engage in.

Merit is actually an integral part of the teaching. It's not something that was tacked on at a later date. Think of the questions that the Buddha's says lie at the beginning of wisdom and discernment: What is skillful, what is unskillful? What is blameworthy, what is blameless? What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? And first-level answer to those questions is the three types of meritorious action: generosity, virtue, and the development of goodwill.

As the Buddha said, the term "act of merit" is another word for happiness. It's a type of happiness that's blameless. It doesn't harm anybody at all. When the Buddha taught giving, he didn't teach that it had to be only to monks and nuns. As he said one time, even if you just throw out the little bit of food left in the bottom of your cup or the bottom of your bowl as a gift to whatever animals might want to eat it, there's merit there—not in the sense of Brownie points, but in the sense of happiness. You've got something to share.

When he was asked where a gift should be given, he said, "Where you feel inspired." In other words, he was encouraging the goodness of the heart, looking for happiness in ways that are not only harmless, but also beneficial to others. When you can find happiness in doing those things, you've learned some important lessons. There are gradations of happiness. And you have some freedom of choice. If you get some food, you can choose either to eat it yourself or to give it to others. You think of the happiness that comes from one or the other. And he says, the wise person will always share. He said that even if it's your last meal, you should be happy to share. That develops a good attitude inside.

In this way of looking for happiness, we're not just grubbing for happiness. We're thinking about the consequences of our actions; trying to be harmless; looking for the long term—all of which are aspects not only of goodness but also of wisdom. After all, as human beings, we have only so many resources, so much time, so much energy. It's a sign of a wise person who realizes that by giving, you gain—more than you give.

The same principle with the precepts: There are things that you might want to do or say, but you realize that if you do them or say them it's going to be harmful to others. So you hold yourself back. You have principles. There may be ways in which, say, you might benefit from lying. But you realize that you don't want whatever reward would come from a lie. You'd rather have the sense of inner principal, the self-esteem that comes from not giving into the temptation to lie, knowing that there are certain things you will not stoop to do.

And then the development of limitless goodwill: a totally harmless way of finding happiness. If you can look at all the people for whom you might have ill will and you can talk yourself into realizing that you don't gain from that, the world wouldn't gain anything from seeing these people suffer, so you're happy to let the issue go: That creates a spaciousness in the mind.

It's a good theme to be thinking about. It feels good and it inspires you to do good actions. They, in turn, reinforce the basic wisdom in that original question: "What when I do it will lead to my long term welfare and happiness?" The wisdom lies in realizing that your happiness is going to depend on your actions. There is such a thing as long-term, and long-term is better than short-term. You have the choice as to what kind of happiness you're going to look for. What the activities of merit teach you are that the more goodness you build into your intentions, the longer-term the happiness will be.

In fact, it's tempting to replace the word "merit" with the word "goodness." "Merit" always sounds like Brownie points. Better to say there are three types of goodness, and that you accumulate goodness. When you think about living in a post-goodness world, you realize that it would be a horrible place to be. And as you pursue this type of goodness, it prepares you for the deeper levels of wisdom.

Because that question—what when I do it will lead to my long term happiness?—sets up some standards. If you want to lay claim to something as yours, one, it has to be happiness; and two, it has to be long-term. So as you're trying to get the mind into concentration and other thoughts come in, you can ask yourself which is going to lead to longer-term happiness: those distracting thoughts, or the state of concentration you can develop if you really stuck with the breath?

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha recommends you develop the perception of inconstancy before focusing on the breath. Anything that's going to be less than a reliable happiness: It's good to see it as inconstant so that you can side with the reasons for wanting to let it go. You begin to realize: If it's inconstant, then it's not really happiness, it's not really pleasure. So why lay claim to it as what you want as your happiness?

So you've got the foundation for the three perceptions right there in that question. If something is inconstant, stressful, it's not worth holding onto as you or yours, so it's not worth pursuing. That's something that's often forgotten when we think about the three perceptions: the extent to which the self is not only the experiencer of these things, but it's also the agent that invests time and energy into trying to pursue them. That's why those perceptions entail a value judgment: Is it worth the effort to go after that kind of happiness, that kind of pleasure that's unreliable?

So the practice of merit relates directly to the deeper levels of insight. In other words, with the practice of merit—not just the idea but actually doing it—you get a good sense what the Buddha's teaching are. You've learned about yourself as an agent, trying to find happiness. You think about the implications of that search, its impact on yourself, its impact on other people, and you develop the ability to judge what's worth doing, what's not worth doing. All of which will hold you in good stead as you go into the deeper levels of insight.

So it's not the case that merit is an extraneous teaching, something that got tacked on in later times, something that can be detached and replaced with something more up-to-date. It's your basic hands-on experience in developing the qualities that will be needed to develop concentration and discernment in ways that are really reliable. As the Buddha once said, if you're stingy, there's no way you're going to gain the noble attainments—no way you're even going to get into jhana. And if you're not virtuous, your concentration is not going to be reliable.

The practice of merit reminds you that meditation is not just a matter of technique. There *is* technique that has to be followed in working with the breath, both for the sake of concentration and for insight, but there's also a goodness of heart that has to be involved. That goodness of heart is what keeps you going at times when the technique doesn't seem to be working or you're getting discouraged. You realize at the very least that you're developing good qualities inside. You can reflect on the good things you've done by being generous and by being virtuous, and that gives you energy, gives you confidence.

So we don't live in a post-merit world. We don't live in a post-goodness world. We live in the world we create with our actions. All the more reason to focus on basing our practice on the practice of merit, and seeing acts of merit as a necessary part of the training of the mind.