

THE INTANGIBLES: A DHARMA MYSTERY

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[Note: this is long, so if you are not feeling "long," please don't read it. It really is for those interested in the dharma.]

For years I have listened to students asking Rinpoche why are they not progressing faster in their dharma practice, and the answer almost always is: you need to accumulate more merit first. Merit, indeed, is cumulative, but we don't accumulate it like in a merit storehouse in the sky somewhere.

The word "accumulate" is misleading in that it suggests stockpiling merit. It would be more accurate to say that merit is cumulative. Its result adds up, but its effect is to reduce our obscurations. We could say that merit helps us to accumulate less obscurations, if that sentence makes sense. I warned you that the word "accumulation" was misleading.

"Merit" is part of a dynamic dharma-duo (which includes "awareness") that together singlehandedly define our path to enlightenment. All branches of Tibetan Buddhism teach that "Merit & Awareness," working together in tandem, are the ticket to Buddhahood.

Therefore this little piece of dharma knowledge is well worth unraveling until we fully take it in and understand it all the way down to the practical level. In fact, personally I found this to be crucial information in my training. When I finally understood how merit and awareness worked, my practice took a giant step forward, but it took a while. I will try to explain, but it may take time and some listening on your part.

Merit, in the dharma sense, has to do with the purity of our intention. A meritorious action is one that does not further obscure our mind, but actually helps to remove what obscurations we already have. Such an action has merit. It is indeed an example of skillful-means.

In Buddhism, offerings are a common way of accumulating merit, acts of generosity, acts that are unselfish and as pure as possible. It is not so much what is offered as it is how it is offered. For example, all over the world Buddhists set out seven offering bowls with various substances in them each day, flowers, food, musical instruments, but especially water. Water is the most common substance offered by Buddhists on their

shrines, yet water is one of the least commercially valuable substances in the world.

Perhaps water is now starting to become more valuable, but up to now water has not been considered a 'precious' substance, except maybe in the desert; in fact, just the opposite. My point is that in offering water, water itself is not considered meritorious because it is just water, so the merit of offering water must be in the offering, our intent. That is what can be meritorious, and it is said that water is offered because since it has no real value, we can offer it purely, without any wince of selfishness for giving it up. Since it is ubiquitous, it is not worth clinging to. There has to be some humor in there somewhere, since it (along with air) is the source of continued life.

If we offer precious gold and give it away to the church (or whomever), we might easily feel a twinge of regret about the money. Even offering our very best food may cause us to wish (however slightly) that it could instead be eaten. These twinges, etc. further obscure the mind and take away from the purity of our offering, thus affecting the amount of merit we accrue in return. Gaining merit is like threading a needle. So, purity of intent seems to be paramount in accumulating merit; it is not what is offered, but rather we offer it.

Merit at some point becomes just a word if we don't keep in mind what merit is for. Accumulating merit simply means accumulating the necessary conditions for us to reach enlightenment. That is what merit is all about, not a thing in itself, but rather an attitude, an approach, becoming spiritually aerodynamically aligned.

As mentioned, it is common to speak of the accumulation of merit like we might accumulate gold and take it to the bank, but as pointed out this can be misleading. Merit rather is a process of purification that shapes us in a spiritually aerodynamic way until we are airborne toward enlightenment. If Samsara is a wind tunnel, then merit is what makes us aerodynamically fit to fly in the winds of change on our way toward enlightenment. Merit is a process that shapes us rather than something in itself, the process of continued purification until we can realize the true nature of the mind.

Typically, merit is part of a matched pair of functions, usually called "merit and awareness," each dovetailing into the other. Not only that, but each member of this pair allows the other to reach greater heights as a purifying agent or whatever we can call it. In other words, merit and awareness are infinitely recursive with one another – a dynamo.

Alternate words for merit and awareness, are skillful-means and wisdom -- same idea. In fact, in Buddhism there are a number of recursive pairs that serve to create purity and

the necessary conditions for enlightenment.

And this is where (at least for me) Zen and Tibetan Buddhism overlap. The Zen Buddhists are expert in showing that ANY activity is perfect for the practice of mindfulness. Just Google "Zen and the Art of..." and you will get a lot of hits, with "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" being perhaps the best-known.

In other words, there is merit in doing anything (and everything) well. And here is one case where a vicious cycle, the recursive-ness of merit and awareness with one another, is beneficial. Perfecting one of them makes it easier to perfect the other, and vice versa -- ad infinitum. How does that work?

This Merit-Awareness dynamic is so important that I am going give you some very direct analogies. In Buddhist terminology "Merit" is often translated as "Skillful Means," and dharma skill is no different from any other skill. Let's take a great golfer like Tiger Woods. His skill is in handling golf clubs and putting the ball where he wants it. That is the merit or skillful means of his craft. The other half of that, what we call in meditation "Awareness," in golf is just the result that Tiger Woods gets from his swings. His skill is so great that he defies the odds against him and is successful where others are not. That hole-in-one (or whatever) skill is the equivalent of "awareness" in dharma training, using the merit-awareness pair and technique.

In every field, whether in the arts, crafts, or any discipline (including dharma), the masters, those with skillful-means, execute their actions so well that the result is remarkable. Often you can pick out the master craft from the others. It stands out, and has something about it, an aura (or whatever) that is unmistakable. Or it, as it sports, just out-and-out wins.

This is related to what (in essence) religion is all about, the things that are made well and last. The Latin root of religion is "religare," to bind. So religion relates to the things that bind, are bound, and that last longest. When everything else dissolves, the truths of religion still stand. That is the idea and dharma is no exception.

Everywhere we look in life there is skill and skillful execution. The Buddhists call this "skillful means," or more commonly just "merit." An action has merit, and is meritorious. A meritorious (perfectly executed) dharma action thins out our obscuration creating more awareness. We can see the nature of the mind better. More awareness allows us to see even more clearly yet to make an even more skillful action, and generate even greater awareness. And it goes on from there.

Let's take simple Shamata meditation practice (allowing the mind to rest on an object) for an example, but it holds true for anything we do with mindfulness. The more skillful we become in allowing the mind to rest (even more so for insight meditation), the more awareness results. The skill in resting the mind is "merit" or skillful means, and the resulting awareness is wisdom or "awareness." And they are recursive, meaning they feed on and catalyze one another. And here is how it functions:

Ever greater skill in resting the mind merits ever greater awareness and ever greater awareness gives us the ability to see how to use even greater skill yet, and so on, infinitely. Increased awareness allows us to see how to be even more skillful and more skillful action (merit) on our part generates even greater awareness, and on around it goes. It is a closed loop. Once this recursive process is started, it feeds on itself, escalates, and after a while reaches some kind of incandescence. It is self-perpetuating.

This phenomenon is so incredibly important that it cannot be stressed enough. It is, IMO, one of the true miracles of the dharma. However, getting the process to kindle, spark, and take fire can take a long time and requires constant practice. We have to learn how to do it.

In summary, a rough definition of merit is that it is what has to be accumulated for us to traverse the path to enlightenment, adding what must be added and removing what must be removed. And as mentioned earlier, the very word "accumulation" can be misleading, suggesting that we are piling something up somewhere. In fact merit accumulation involves paring down and thinning out our obscurations – making them transparent.

We know that merit and awareness include honing our mindfulness to the point where it takes fire and true clarity (insight meditation) is born. After that, the going gets easier because it becomes increasingly self-perpetuating. However, getting to that point is not always easy, which is why I spend so much time attempting to explain how to accomplish it. Buddha laid out these instructions 2500 years ago and they are still true today.

If you have questions, please ask them.

