

## The Transfer of Merit

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To train to the best of our ability is to transfer merit to all sentient beings. The merit of keeping the Precepts and training cannot be limited or measured; the results extend far beyond self, family and friends. When we turn our gaze to the Cosmic Buddha and act from the still centre of our heart for even one moment, the whole universe benefits and rejoices. The important thing is no matter where we are, whatever we may have done, whatever state we may be in, that we wholeheartedly turn to the Eternal and take responsibility for our lives. When we act from the core of our being thus, we allow the flow of compassion of the Eternal to cleanse, comfort, and sustain not only ourselves, but all beings. Merit is not something materialistic that we can set out to accumulate as a sort of currency to buy peace and happiness for ourselves and others. It cannot be the object of training. Rather, merit is the consequence of living by the Precepts, ceasing from evil and doing only good. It is the turning of the Wheel of the Dharma impelled by the effort of sincere training. Just as a smile can brighten the hearts of many who behold it, so the merit of training is far-reaching and gives help and encouragement to countless beings.

The fact that merit does accrue from training has nothing to do with us personally. 'I' do not give 'my' merit; 'you' do not give 'your' merit. We just train and allow merit, the pure love of the Cosmic Buddha, to flow through all beings. Merit is not something that we give and, as a consequence, are somehow depleted. Simply, we get 'self' out of the way enough so as to be as a pipe for the compassion, love, and wisdom of the Eternal. We do not manipulate anything or anybody. A while ago, as I was preparing to be celebrant at a memorial ceremony, I asked in my meditation: What do I do? How can I help at this ceremony? The smiling answer was: *You* don't do anything. You just stand there (albeit willingly and wholeheartedly in meditation). The Cosmic Buddha does all that needs to be done. We do the best we can and extend our help and sympathy to those in need wisely, and when it is good to do so. We have faith enough to put ourselves and others into the hands of the Eternal. And sometimes the best way to help is to be humble enough to realise that, other than making an effort in our meditation, we need do nothing extra at all.

As all we are doing is not impeding the flow of compassion of the Eternal, it is not then up to us to lay down any restrictive conditions on the merit offered. A gift truly given is one which is unconditional and does not expect anything in return. There is a story of a trainee who was so attached to her Buddha statue that she devised a funnel so that the perfume of the incense would ascend to her statue only. This resulted in the Buddha statue being disfigured by a blackened, sooty nose. We must be careful not to sully our offerings with jealous limitations or expectations. While it is good to offer merit to someone specifically in need, we must be careful to guard ourselves against foolish judgmentalism such as 'these people are worthy of merit, and these people are not.' From training comes the deep and heart-felt longing that all beings may be released from suffering and realise the Truth. We need not fear that there is not enough compassion for all; the wisdom and compassion of the Eternal are boundless.

At the monastery, there are many specific ways in which merit is offered. For example, at the *Festival of Feeding the Hungry Ghosts* there is a special ceremony for which a large altar is arranged and filled with delicious food and drink. Together with the special scriptures for this occasion, this

gives us the opportunity to offer all that we have, material and spiritual, so that beings in troubled states of existence may be helped. They are free to hear and partake of the food of the Dharma. Offertories at the end of scriptures we recite daily dedicate them to all beings that they may realise the Truth and ask for the help of the Buddhas and Ancestors. At memorial services, through appropriate scriptures and exhortations, we offer and express the Dharma so as to help and guide the newly dead. Another formal way in which both monastic and lay trainees can offer merit is to request a *transfer of merit notice* to be displayed on the notice board hung at the entrance to the Meditation Hall. All trainees can then offer merit to those particularly in need. This can be done by silently saying a short prayer at the start of the meditation period, such as: *We pray that the merit of our meditation period may be given to ..... who is in need. May they understand the Truth quickly and become naturally pure.* This is just one simple example. From meditation, our wish can be expressed in infinite forms and ways.

The gassho, bowing, the offering of incense, the recitation of verses before eating, bathing, shaving, and other activities are just some of the many other formal ways in which we are able to share and express the Truth. These forms can be very helpful and many of them can be adapted for lay life. But it is not necessary to wait for special occasions or ceremonies to transfer merit. The forms are in themselves empty; we give them beauty and meaning through the sincerity and effort of our training and meditation. It is up to us to make each and every act, however little or unimportant it seems, into a truly religious act and a true offering for all sentient beings:

Out of gratitude to the Buddhas and Patriarchs we give Dharma, we give wealth, we give life itself -- strength, youth, beauty, wealth, everything we have and, even then, we cannot give thanks enough for one second of their true training; we can never repay their kindness to us. Only by our own true training is this possible and then, again, there is no repayment; it is just the work of a Buddha.<sup>1</sup>

Note

1. Rev. Roshi Jiyu-Kennett in The Kyojukaimon and Commentary (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey, 1977), p. 11.