

THE INTANGIBLES: THE TWO ACCUMULATIONS

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I am sorry to say that it took me many years to get the following concepts through my thick skull. Not sure what I was thinking or even if I was thinking, but I kind of let it go in one ear and out the other. Somehow it seemed like too great an effort or somehow not necessary for me to actually just do it as suggested. I guess I don't like being told what to do. That was a very big mistake on my part. This has to do with how we begin and end our dharma practice for each session (any practice), whether sitting on the cushion or out walking around.

In previous blogs in this series I pointed out that the effects of merit accumulation are key to reducing the obstacles that prevent us from recognizing the true nature of the mind. We perform acts all day long, most of them probably unskillful, but certainly some skillful enough to generate merit of one kind or another. What becomes of this merit? Does it just pile up in some corner of our mind, or what? Where does merit go?

I still have a lot of questions myself in this area, so I am no expert, but the Buddhist teachers I have listened to suggest that merit, unless somehow contained, is just free to go. We benefit from the merit whenever it is generated, one-time, but it then evaporates or otherwise trickles away. It did its thing. Obviously the question then becomes how do we accumulate merit beyond its initial effect? The Buddhists have a method to preserve merit, benefit once from it, but then still have it keep on benefiting us. How is this possible?

Karma and merit are two different things, but they overlap. No matter how good our karma can get, it only affects our rebirth in Samsara. And yes, karma also can generate merit, but it is said that while karmic merit makes for more pleasant conditions for us on the Samsaric (day-to-day) level, eventually it is used up and we regress to a previous state, and perhaps to even a lower rebirth. So the merit from karma is temporary. What about the other use of merit as present in the dharma pair "Merit & Awareness?"

In the gathering or accumulation of merit as in the pair, "Merit & Wisdom (or awareness)," merit can be put to use in thinning out and eventually removing whatever is obscuring our ability to realize our own Buddha Nature -- the true nature of the mind. The recursive result of the reciprocation of merit and awareness (one to another) results in the actual lessening of our obscurations. And, if we can keep from recording more karma by purifying our actions, we can hold onto that result, be it realization or any improvement in our dharmic condition.

I have found that I had to stop imagining "merit" as something that accumulates somewhere, even though the translation of the Tibetan often is the "accumulation of merit." Instead, it is more accurate to think of merit as effects that are cumulative, and

whose result is a thinning out of our obscurations, rather than a pile of pixie dust stored up somewhere. In other words, merit accumulation (cumulative merit) is a process that removes our obscurations so that when all is said and done, we have become clearer. That clarity (awareness) is the result of cumulative merit -- accumulating merit. It can stay with us.

Now the way that Buddhists preserve the merit and awareness they have accumulated is by dedicating it. And here again, the terms can be misleading, so hold on to your hats, for here come another pair of essential dharma terms: aspirations and the dedication of merit.

Rinpoches that I have studied under make a big deal of making aspirations both before you sit down to practice and then dedicating the merit accrued after you have practiced. Some go so far to say that this is equal to or more important than the practice itself. I can't speak to that myself, but the idea is simple enough.

Before we sit down to meditate and do our practice, we declare our intent through an aspiration. For example, we aspire for our practice to benefit all sentient beings – sentiment like that. It is that simple.

And, in similar fashion, before we get up from the cushion (or whatever practice we do) we dedicate any merit we have earned (however small) to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that they may benefit all sentient beings and bring each to enlightenment. In a word, this is what comprises aspiration and dedication.

The Buddhist texts state that any merit we accumulate (and fail to dedicate) only blesses us once and like a single drop of water falling on the ground, it evaporates, while merit that is dedicated to others is like adding that drop of water to the ocean. It lasts as long the ocean lasts. I am still thinking on that one, but that's what they say.

What I can say is that these four things, Merit & Awareness, Aspirations & Dedication, have one thing perfectly in common, that they exist to somehow lessen our obscurations. It is almost as if these practices (the dedication for others) are a form of misdirection, just like magicians use. I don't mean it quite like it sounds, so bear with me.

While we are focused on aspiring to help others and dedicating any merit to others, actually the purity of our intentions is streamlining our own view (and mindstream), gradually eliminating our particular obscurations. The problem with aspirations and dedications is that they can be (using the Buddhist term) "poisonous," meaning they can be tainted by our own selfish attachments. By offering our aspirations and dedications to others, we are one-step removed from our own selfish interests and that much more aerodynamically pure or "dharmic."

So, in summary, and this is the extent of my understanding, the emphasis on aspiring to help and dedicating merit to others perhaps does benefit "others" in this world in some

way. I can't say. But I do know that removing self-reference (our own selfish-ness) from the equation gives us a better chance (makes it easier) to be pure in our own dedication gestures. And that kind of purity is what gradually removes the layers of obscuration we have accumulated.

I tell myself that dharma practice makes us more aerodynamically sound and able to rise above (transform) the fierce winds of change that Samsaric life subjects us to. And here is another analogy I use with myself, if you will permit it.

Dedicating merit to others is not unlike spinning a coin on a table top. We have to spin the coin and get our fingers out of the way or the fingers affect the spin. Here the fingers getting in the way represents the self-attachments clouding our merit.

Apparently when it comes to including ourselves in the offering, it is too easy for our habitual attachments to me, myself, and I to occlude or obscure the purity we need to attain in the way of merit, so we are encouraged instead to include others along with ourselves, and before ourselves.

And I have not discussed "Awareness" (also called wisdom) here, but it should be fairly obvious. We intuitively know that Awareness is cumulative and not stockpiled at some spiritual Fort Knox. It just "IS." The entire point of this blog is that it is the same for our merit. Merit is cumulative and just IS. Or if we insist on finding a use for the word "accumulation," then we are where merit accumulates. It gets better as we do. At least this is how I understand it.

