

Merit for The Path

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The concept of merit is universally recognised by Buddhists and frequently found in Buddhist Teachings and writings of all Buddhist traditions.

Put simply merit is our mental wealth, our mental power to bring us what we want in our life and in our experience and includes our power to do what we choose to do.

If we are materialistic we have a belief system that says our well being is achieved throughout our life through manipulating phenomena and conditions outside our self, in the external world. Hence we relate to the idea of wealth as an external manifestation.

However despite an abundance of good external conditions we may feel mentally poor. We may be depressed, we may worry a lot, we may experience a lot of anger, or frequent lack of energy. These are symptoms of mental poverty.

The fortunate thing is it's a situation that can be rectified in a very direct and practical way.

The definition of merit from the Buddhist perspective can be understood as:

1. Merit is the accumulated kammic result of good deeds you do with your body, speech and mind.
2. Merit is analogous to money - it can be used to gain external wealth and internal development. It can be used for whatever purpose you wish.
3. Merit is the fuel of mental and physical health, wealth and prosperity.
4. Merit is what you generate by benefiting others.

The wonderful thing is there is no lack of others who you can help! You only need to look around and most likely you will see someone who you can offer your help to.

Merit is important to help us along our journey through life. It connects us with factors that are good and beneficial to ourself and others, and can improve the quality of our mind. While the material wealth a person gathers can be lost by theft, flood, fire, confiscation, etc., the benefit of merits follows us from life to life and cannot be lost, although it will be exhausted as we live if not replenished.

A person will experience happiness here and now as well as hereafter through the performance of good actions, accumulating positive merits in the present time.

Buddha advised that one should collect oceans of merits and virtues by performing deeds that counteract the negative kamma of having broken the five precepts in our past. Imagine you had a large glass container with a small cupful of black ink in it. If clear water is added to the container, then gradually the liquid turns from black to grey. If a lot of clear, pure water is added to the glass container, the effect of the black ink become less and less and eventually the whole container appears as if it's filled with clear water.

The analogy is that the black ink is negative kamma made in our past (this life or before) which causes us to suffer in many ways in our life. The clear water is poured into the container as we do more and more meritorious acts in this life and a point is reached where, although the black ink (black kamma) is still in the container, its negative effect is very much diluted.

Buddha Dhamma practitioners devote much of their time and energy to performing many highly meritorious actions such as the ones below for example:

1. Supporting of Life (the Precept of No Killing) — offering food to the Buddhist Monks, Nuns and Laypeople, Offering of robes to the Buddhist monastic community (Kathina Ceremony), offering of clean water, clean spaces, medicine, money, shelter, clean dishes to others.
2. Giving (the precept of no stealing) — giving our time, love, money, wealth, medicines and food to other, giving attention to others, and giving people the space that they need – allow them to come into your lane when driving, offer your parking space, allow people room, provide a nurturing space.
3. Building and maintaining harmonious relationships with others (the precept of no sexual misconduct) – actively maintaining wholesome and robust relationships, building harmony, such as attending family gatherings, bringing people together, doing things for others with no strings attached, respecting others relationships, being sincere in our actions.
4. Being truthful (the precept of no lying) – being accurate in one’s speech, accepting of other’s point of view, providing clear and concise information, shining light on the situation, seeing things as they really are, admitting mistakes to one’s self and others, being honest and courageous.
5. Being clear and attentive (the precept of no intoxicants that cloud the mind) – accepting situations that are painful and difficult with accountability, facing up to challenges, difficult people and situations, begin mindful in the present on the body speech and mind, practicing samatha and vipassana meditation.

The general advice from Buddhist teachers is to make more merit than we consume on a daily basis following these four simple rules:

- Make good karma (merit) every day, practising generosity and lending a helping hand.
- Keeping five precepts.
- Offer your help in Buddha Dhamma activities anytime which is highly meritorious.
- Learning how to dedicate and share our merits.

In the Dhammapada it is written: *'happiness is the outcome of the accumulation of merit.'* (Dhammapada, 118) 18

Merit is a great facilitator; it opens the doors of opportunity everywhere. A meritorious person will succeed in whatever venture he or she puts their effort into. If the person wishes to do business, they will meet with the right contacts and friends. If the person wishes to be a scholar, they will be awarded with scholarships and supported by academic mentors. If the person wishes to progress in meditation they will meet with a skilful meditation teacher who guides him or her through their spiritual development. Their dreams will be realized through the grace of this treasury of merit. It is merit that enables a person to be reborn in the heavens, and provides them with the right conditions and support for their attainment of Nibbana.

Ten Ways of Making Merit

The Buddha identified ten ways of making merit in ascending order of power.

These are given in Pali with English equivalents.

1. DANA – Charity, Generosity.
2. SILA – Observing Precepts, Morality.
3. BHAVANA – Meditation.
4. APACAYANA – Respect for Dhamma Teachers.
5. VEYYAVACCA – Giving a helping hand for others to perform virtuous deeds.
6. PATTIDANA – Sharing Merits.
7. PATTANUMODANA – Joyful acknowledgements in the sharing of Merits.
8. DHAMMASSAVANA – Listening to Dhamma Teachings.
9. DHAIKADESANA – Teaching Dhamma to others.
10. DHITTHUJUKAMMA – Righting one's own wrong views.

Buddha Dhamma Teachers constantly point to merit making opportunities and direct their students in merit making activities as the fuel for their learning and insight.

The Law of Cause and Effect (kamma and vipaka) determines that to attain learning and benefit in respect of anything, it is necessary to produce an accumulation of available wholesome action (Pali: kusala kamma).

This merit is the 'energy' of all realisations and the cause of continued wholesome conditions of practice. A corollary of this means, without sufficient available energy, the student's meditation will not produce realisations, and further, the student will find it difficult to find conditions that will support his or her Dhamma Practice.

Some basic conditions have to arise in order for beings to be able to practice the Buddha Dhamma. These are:

1. You have to be born into a Buddha-Sasana. (Buddha Teaching era)
2. You have to be born into a suitable body or form.

3. You have to be born healthy in order to live beyond a few years.
4. You have to have sufficient food, water, warmth and conditions to sustain this present life.
5. You have to meet the Buddha's Teaching of the Middle Way in a language that can be understood.
6. You have to be Teachable as regards the Middle Way.
7. You have to desire to learn the Middle Way.
8. You have no major obstruction to being trained in the Middle Way.
9. Over an extended period of time, you have to desire to practice and realise the Teachings of the Middle Way.
10. You have to have sufficient leisure time to be taught and to practice the Middle Way.

In Australia, the maintenance and development of old and new Dhamma Centres is one type of activity that for many practitioners could act as the base of new wholesome kamma on which they can continue to practice and realise the Middle Way throughout their life.

A practitioner's home altar should reflect his or her Centre's or Temple's altar for maximum benefit. If the temple attended is Mahayana, the home altar should reflect this style of practice. Cleaning altars is an offering in itself. It is no different to the cleaning of floors in a Monastery as Monks and Nuns do as part of their usual practice.

As the hard shell of a tortoise protects the soft body within, the soft Dhamma too, has to be protected by the physical structure of Temples: their upkeep, administration, financing and development. At the same time, the shell or structure is not an end itself, but exists for the benefit of Dhamma practitioners through supporting the preservation and proliferation of The Noble Eightfold Path as taught by the Buddha. A Centre with a sound

structure will not become a dead institution, and will not become an empty shell devoid of the Body of Living Dhamma.

Buddhist Temples exist for learning, practicing and realizing the Dhamma.