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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa

Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia

33 Brooking Street, Upwey, Victoria 3158, Australia

Email: wbu@bdcu.org.au

Website: www.bdcu.org.au

Associated Institution of the World Buddhist University

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May You Be Well and Happy

Summary

This article highlights Buddha's teaching on the conditions required for making wholesome merit, the ten ways of making merit, the importance of merit for a Dhamma practitioner, and the direction of the merit.

MERIT MAKING OPPORTUNITIES OF USE FOR ACHIEVERS

Opportunities for making great merit (Kusala Kamma) are rare because they depend on conditions that are difficult to "assemble". For example, to offer food to a Bhikkhu requires at least ten contemporaneous conditions to arise.

- (1) The co-existent human birth of both the Bhikkhu and oneself.
- (2) A living Bhikkhu who is near at hand.
- (3) Sufficient vision to see.
- (4) The knowledge that such an act is meritorious.
- (5) Food available.
- (6) The volition to want to offer food to another person.
- (7) The correct time and proper place within the Vinaya Rules.
- (8) The time and means to prepare the food.
- (9) Sufficient physical strength to prepare and offer the food.
- (10) The actual acceptance of the food by the Bhikkhu.

The "assembling" of such conditions may take as long as 1000 million life times or more.

Without mindfulness and wisdom, great merit making opportunities are unlikely to be recognised. Dhamma Teachers constantly point to them and direct students into merit making activity. The Buddha identified ten ways of making merit in ascending order of power.

- (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.
- (9) DHAMMADESANA - Teaching Dhamma.
- (10) DHITTHUJUKAMMA - Righting one's own wrong views.

The Law of Cause and Effect (Kamma & Vipaka) determines that to attain learning and benefit in respect of meditation, it is necessary to produce an accumulation of available wholesome (Kusala) Kamma. This merit is the "fuel" of all realizations and the cause of continued wholesome conditions of practice. A corollary of this means, without sufficient available merit, a

student's meditation will not produce realizations and further, the student will find it difficult to find conditions which will support Dhamma Practice. Some basic conditions which have to arise in order for beings to be able to practice the Buddha Dhamma are:

- (1) Have to be born into a Buddha-Sasana.
- (2) Have to be born into a suitable body or form.
- (3) Have to be born healthy in order to live beyond a few years.
- (4) Have to have sufficient food, water, warmth and conditions to sustain this present life.
- (5) Have to meet the Buddha's Teaching of the Middle Way in a language that can be understood.
- (6) Have to be Teachable as regards the Middle Way.
- (7) Have to desire to Learn the Middle Way.
- (8) Have no major obstructions to being trained in the Middle Way over an extended period of time.
- (9) Have to desire to practice and realise the Teachings of the Middle Way.
- (10) Have to have sufficient leisure time to be taught and to practice the Middle Way.

Some time ago, a particular monastery was in danger of being destroyed by an invading army. The Abbott requested local villagers to begin building a new section of the monastery just weeks before the army was likely to pull it down. In this way, the villagers could participate in great Merit making activity to help them obtain a good rebirth as the invaders were likely to kill them.

In the western world the maintenance and development of old and new Dhamma centres is one type of activity which for many practitioners, could act the base of new wholesome kamma on which they continue to practice and realize the Middle Way. The Practitioner's home altar should reflect the Centre's altar for maximum benefit. Cleaning altars is good practice as an offering. It is no different to maintaining a monastery or cleaning the floors as Zen monks do as part of their practice.

As the hard shell of a tortoise protects the soft body within, the Dhamma too, has to be protected by the structure of centres, 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. In this way centres will not become dead institutions, and will not become empty shells devoid of the body of living dhamma.

By use of these processes, merit making opportunities can increase both in quality and quantity. When properly cultivated, a Practitioner's surroundings become a vehicle to move him or her along the Middle Path. The merit thus accumulated can be directed towards successfully achieving the following stages of practice.

- (1) Desire to Practice.

- (2) Resolve to Practice.
- (3) Remembrance of Practice.
- (4) Concentration of Practice.
- (5) Wisdom arising during Practice.

Undirected merit, when vast, is likely to produce successive births of great wealth, power, comfort and pleasure; but in the end, nothing has been achieved because these are impermanent and subject to decay when the merit is exhausted.

On the base of renunciation, merit making opportunities are like Nibbana coupons or gold bars, arising in a flash, to be picked up by those who wish to recognize them, and then put down.

The merit made should be dedicated to follow the Middle Path. Do it now. Beware of ritual without mindfulness of the action involved in the ritual. Remember the Buddha's words 'Just as the Kusa grass wrongly handled cuts the hand; even so, asceticism wrongly practiced drags one to hell.'

F.C., M.F., J.D.H.