

# Merit

## An Introduction to a Study Guide

Of all the concepts central to Buddhism, merit (*puñña*) is one of the least known and least appreciated in the West. This is perhaps because the pursuit of merit seems to be a lowly practice, focused on getting and "selfing," whereas higher Buddhist practice focuses on letting go, particularly of any sense of self. Because we in the West often feel pressed for time, we don't want to waste our time on lowly practices, and instead want to go straight to the higher levels. Yet the Buddha repeatedly warns that the higher levels cannot be practiced in a stable manner unless they develop on a strong foundation. The pursuit of merit provides that foundation. To paraphrase a modern Buddhist psychologist, one cannot wisely let go of one's sense of self until one has developed a wise sense of self. The pursuit of merit is the Buddhist way to develop a wise sense of self.

The readings in the Study Guide [see citation for details] show how this is done. They begin with a section on *basic wisdom*, which shows how the questions that lead ultimately to the wisdom of letting go first focus on things to hold onto: the skillful traits that, on the beginning level, provide a secure place to stand while letting go of character traits that are obviously harmful. Buddhist wisdom famously focuses in the characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, but the application of that wisdom grows out of the pursuit of what is relatively constant and pleasant, and requires a mature sense of self: able to plan for the future, to sacrifice short-term happiness for long-term happiness, to consider the needs of others, and to develop a strong sense of self-reliance in the pursuit of a happiness that is wise, pure, and compassionate.

The section on merit then sets out in general terms the types of meritorious activities that conduce to that happiness, focusing primarily on three: *giving*, *virtue*, and *meditation*. The next three sections focus on the ways in which each of these activities can be pursued so as to produce the most happiness. For instance, the section on giving discusses how the happiness of generosity can be maximized by wisely choosing the proper motivation for giving a gift, a proper gift, and a proper recipient for one's gift. The section on virtue shows how to learn from one's past mistakes without succumbing to debilitating feelings of guilt. The section on meditation discusses not only how the development of good will — the meditative practice most often cited in conjunction with merit — can lead to happiness both now and in the future, but also how it can help minimize the bad results of one's past unwise actions.

All three of these forms of merit conduce to the highest form of merit: the *realization of stream-entry*, the first glimpse of the deathless. Thus the penultimate section of the Study Guide focuses on the happiness and well-being that derive from this attainment.

For all the rewards of meritorious action, however, the concluding section serves as a reminder that the pursuit of happiness ultimately leads *beyond the pursuit of merit*. In fact, the Study Guide is planned as part of a two-part Study Guide covering the Buddhist approach to the pursuit of happiness, with the second part discussing the teachings on the three characteristics as the next stage in this approach as they lead to the deathless happiness attained with arahantship. Still, it would be a mistake to view the two stages as radically separate. In the course of developing a wise sense of self in the pursuit of merit, one is already learning how to let go of unwise ways of "selfing" as one learns to overcome stinginess, apathy, and hard-heartedness through the development of giving, virtue, and good will. The teachings on the three characteristics simply carry this same process of "de-selfing" for the sake of an even truer happiness to a higher pitch.

The Contents of the Study Guide are as follows:

Introduction  
Basic Wisdom  
Puñña  
Dana (generosity)  
Sila (virtue)  
Bhavana (meditation)  
The Merit of Stream-entry  
Beyond Merit

**Source:** "Merit: A Study Guide", by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstinsight.org/lib/study/merit.html> . [Introduction to the Study Guide excerpted by Alexander Peck]

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