

The Doctrine Of Merit (Puñña) In Buddhism: A Cross-Canonical Perspective

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Abstract. Through a variety of scriptural traditions, such as the Pāli Canon and the Chinese Buddhist Canon (大藏經 Dàzàngjīng), the article examines the idea of puñña (merit) in Buddhism. It is believed that merit is the basis for pleasure in the present and the future and that it is a motivating element on the journey to emancipation. The material is on examining the threefold merit, the ten meritorious deeds, and practise techniques including meditation, moral discipline, charity, and merit commitment. The article contrasts the methods of Southern and Northern Buddhism, drawing on important texts including the Dhammapada, Saddharma-pundarika-Sutra, the Milindapañha, and Chơn Lý (The True Dhamma). The studies emphasises that, when used with knowledge and the correct perspective, merit is not just the outcome of good karma but also a path to enlightenment.

1. INTRODUCTION

In human existence, joy and anguish are inextricably linked. Happiness is temporary, while suffering frequently lasts. The Buddha asserts that ignorance and greed are the main causes of suffering because people cling to their bodies and belongings because they think they are permanent. All conditioned occurrences, however, are the result of causes and conditions and are not permanent.

Through the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the development of the Pāramīs, which includes the perfection of generosity, the Buddha taught the way to be free from suffering. In addition to providing benefits right once, giving supports emancipation and is a cause that will be worthwhile for many lifetimes to come. The Buddha compared charitable money to items taken from a burning home; both are beneficial to the practitioner over time and constitute true wealth. Given the great practical and spiritual significance of the Buddhist practice of giving, the author has decided to focus this research on the topic of "Understanding Merit through the Perspective of Buddhist Scriptures" in order to better understand the concept of merit and apply it to both individual and societal life.

* The research scope is on certain representative texts within the Buddhist Canon that address the notion of merit, particularly highlighting the practice of generosity. Research methodologies encompass: Analysing scriptural content, Systematising many forms of merit, Employing illustrative examples to elucidate practical implications in everyday life.

* The Practical Significance of the Topic : In contemporary society, philanthropic and volunteer initiatives, spanning governmental, private, and religious domains, are crucial in aiding the disadvantaged. Investigating the concept of merit within Buddhist texts enhances understanding of engaging in virtuous deeds aligned with the Dharma, fostering compassion, and progressing towards a peaceful existence in both the present and future. This article aids Buddhist practitioners in comprehending the appropriate conditions and techniques for giving, therefore cultivating genuine wholesome karma that establishes a basis for inner peace and escape from the cycle of pain and rebirth.

2. CONTENTS

2.1. General introduction to Merit

2.1.1. Definition of Merit (Puñña)

In Pāli, the word "Puñña" is typically rendered as "merit" or "meritorious actions." In its original context, puñña denotes a condition that cleanses the mind and liberates it from impurities. It is an intrinsic, healthy

characteristic that is non-material and, hence, somewhat delicate and challenging to observe or understand. Only individuals possessing knowledge or psychic perception may accurately assess the value of another.

The tranquilly and welfare of sentient beings, including humans, are the results of merit within the three realms of existence. An one with substantial merit endures less sorrow and enhanced enjoyment; conversely, one devoid of worth encounters the contrary. Consequently, merit is considered a contributing element to pleasure in both this life and subsequent reincarnations.

Commonly, a someone who is affluent or influential is referred to as “a person of significant merit.”

This perspective pertains to the outcome of merit, rather than its origin. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Visākhā described her affluent father-in-law, Migāra, as “one who uses old things,” suggesting that he was only reaping the benefits of previous qualities without cultivating new ones in the present. Failure to cultivate fresh virtuous actions while relying solely on the fruits of past good deeds may result in future repercussions such as poverty, pain, or reincarnation in the world of hungry ghosts.

Consequently, only merit can yield enduring calm and satisfaction for sentient creatures. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha explicitly emphasised the importance of merit accrued by contributions and assistance to the Sangha, particularly when those monastics engage in contemplative focus. *“Monks, when a Bhikkhu partakes of another's robes, food, shelter, bedding, and medicine, and achieves and sustains profound mental concentration, this generates immeasurable merit for the benefactor, fostering goodness, nurturing tranquilly, belonging to the celestial domain, yielding a fruitful outcome of joy, resulting in divine rebirth, and engendering pleasure, delight, desirability, happiness, and peace.”*¹

*“Bhikkhus, there exist five sources of merit; these five sources of virtue serve as sustenance for tranquilly, belong to the heavenly domain, yield the matured fruits of joy, and facilitate rebirth in the heavens...”*²

From the aforementioned teachings, it is evident that:

- * Merit is the consequence of virtuous karma.
- * Merit is not enduring unless it is consistently nurtured.
- * Only the sagacious can evaluate the value of others.
- * Assisting realized monastics constitutes a significant source of merit.

2.1.2. Types of Blessings 2.1.2.1.

Giving (*Dāna*)

Generosity is the foundation of all benefits. Without generosity, enduring wealth is unattainable. The Buddha believed that giving to noble folks is a significant source of merit. However, a somebody with genuine compassion will not disregard anyone in distress. Giving is a concrete manifestation of benevolence; it diminishes avarice, expands intellectual horizons, and fosters the development of additional virtuous attributes. Practitioners ought to start sharing by little gestures: a slice of cake, a share of earnings... as goods are transient, and once relinquished, it becomes challenging to engage in virtuous actions. Generosity serves as the foundation for the cultivation of virtues (*pāramī*). In the absence of generosity, the refinement of traits such as patience and diligence becomes arduous. Individuals who have consistently assisted others often experience prosperity and effortlessly draw money in this lifetime. Altruistic persons who monitor and discreetly assist others at opportune moments will achieve advantageous results in future existences.

◆ The advantage of providing charity with prompt results

To achieve the benefits of almsgiving in this life (particularly within seven days), four fundamental requirements must be met:

1. The receiver must be an *Anāgāmi* (Non-Returner) or an Arahant (*vatthusampadā*).
2. The acquisition of the offering must occur by legitimate and untainted methods (*paccayasampadā*).
3. The giver must sustain a healthy and joyous mindset during all three phases: before to, during, and after to the act of giving (*cetanāsampadā*).

¹ Aṅguttara Nikāya, Vol. I, Trans. by Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau, Religion Publication, 1996, p. 656

² Aṅguttara Nikāya, Vol. II, Trans. by Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau, Religion Publication, 1996, p. 387

4. The receiver, either the *Anāgāmi* or Arahant, must have just exited the cessation of perception and emotion (*nirodha-samāpatti*) and is currently engaged in the alms circle (*guṇātireka-sampadā*).

*"Upon the fulfilment of these four causes, the advantageous outcome of giving will materialise within seven days "*³.

Once, the Blessed One resided in Jetavana Monastery in Sāvattihī, within the garden of Anāthapiṇḍika. During that period, Nanda's mother, the laywoman Velukandaki, intended to present alms to the Sangha in six sections, presided over by the Venerables *Sāriputta* and *Mahā Moggallāna*. Observing this, the Buddha said to the Bhikkhus: the offering consists of six components, three of which belong to the donor and three to the receivers. The donor: prior to giving, enjoys delight; throughout the act of giving, embodies unwavering faith; subsequent to providing, attains a sense of happiness. The receiver is either devoid of greed, hate, and illusion or is earnestly pursuing the road of liberation from these afflictions. The Blessed One proclaimed: the merit of such a sacrifice is boundless and unfathomable, akin to the limitless expanse of the ocean. This is an excellent source of virtue, resulting in tranquilly, joy, and elevated rebirths in heavenly domains.

2.1.2.2. Keeping Precepts (*Sīla*):

The monastic precepts were instituted by the Buddha in response to the emergence of contaminated phenomena (*Sāsava-dhamma*) inside the Sangha, aimed at preventing decline, preserving purity, promoting concord, and preserving the noble behaviour of Bhikkhus. Moreover, precepts sustain laypeople's confidence in the Sangha, averting misconceptions or parallels with heretical groups. The Buddha established precepts after to transgressions, indicating that they stem from self-awareness and voluntary adherence rather than compulsion. An individual who upholds unblemished ethics has 10 notable advantages:

1. Precepts facilitate official admission into the monastic community, provide protection from the Sangha, and ensure persistence in a sanctified atmosphere conducive to spiritual practice.
2. A monk who adheres to the precepts enhances the dignity of the Sangha, cultivating mutual delight and harmony, akin to encountering a noble companion on the journey.
3. Precepts foster communal solidarity, cultivating empathy and support in the face of transgressions, so maintaining peace and safety within the Sangha.
4. A Bhikkhu adhering to the precepts exemplifies the Buddha's presence, bolstering the trust of laypeople and leading sentient beings from illusion.
5. Precepts establish a basis for cultivating concentration (*samādhi*) and knowledge (*paññā*), therefore enhancing the commitment of lay practitioners.
6. By utilising precepts as a behavioural norm, the Sangha may appropriately chastise transgressors, so maintaining internal purity.
7. A person who adheres to their principles will promptly acknowledge and atone for errors, experience sorrow, and implement requisite adjustments, leading to inner tranquilly and communal welfare.
8. Precepts serve as protections against impurities that emerge from the interaction of the six sense bases with their corresponding objects, maintaining the purity of body and mind, and assisting in the eradication of existing impurities.
9. Precepts facilitate the elimination of the roots of defilements, averting future reincarnations of unwholesome tendencies, and fostering consistent advancement on the road to enlightenment.
10. Precepts constitute the foundational pillars of the Buddha's Dispensation. Individuals who earnestly adhere to them are safeguarding the Tathāgata's heritage and defending the authentic Dharma from obliteration.

2.1.2.3. Meditation (*Bhāvanā*)

Meditative absorption (*Jhāna*) facilitates the elimination of defilements, fortifies the mind, and bestows benefits in both the present and future. Bhikkhu Samudra, despite being confined in a fabricated hell devised by King Ashoka, assiduously engaged in meditation and achieved Arahantship. Boiling oil failed to incinerate his body, stunning the king. Subsequently, King Ashoka expressed remorse, sought refuge in the Triple Gem, and became a guardian of the Buddha Dharma. Venerable Samudra thereafter soared into the sky, instilling profound awe in the hearts of the monarch and all observers.

³ Bhikkhu Ho Phap, *Understanding the Merit of Giving Alms*, Religious Publications, 2008, p.177

2.1.2.4. Respect (*Apacāyana*)

Respect is a significant source of merit. Honouring the Sangha bestows rewards, as they maintain virtuous principles. Prostrating before the Buddha, reciting suttas, and devoting merit are further methods to foster virtue. In the Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā Sūtra (Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra), Lady Śrīmālā and her royal retinue, including princes and palace servants, prostrated themselves upon witnessing the Buddha appear in the sky. They presented their sincere hearts and extolled His infinite qualities. This demonstrated complete dedication in body, speech, and thought, creating the triadic respectful karma.⁴

2.1.2.5. Assisting in Righteous Deeds (*Veyyāvacca*)

Participating in beneficial activities yields significant value. An ancient narrative recounts the exploits of 33 men, guided by the youthful Magha, who consistently engaged in benevolent acts: constructing roads, bridges, and rest houses, as well as supplying water and warmth to the populace. Motivated by envy, a local head wrongfully accused them of theft, leading the king to decree their execution by elephants. Nevertheless, because of their empathetic nature, the elephants declined to advance. Upon uncovering the truth, the monarch punished the chief and liberated the righteous 33. Upon death, they were reincarnated in Tāvātimsa Heaven, where Magha ascended as Śakra, the King of the Devas.

2.1.2.6. Dedication of Merit (*Pattidāna*)

Upon completing commendable actions, one needs to dedicate the merit to the departed. In accordance with the Northern Canon, Venerable Mahamoggallāna rescued his mother, known as Mātā Mahā-Moggallānassa in Pali literature, from hell by presenting food to the Sangha and requesting one hundred esteemed monks to partake in the merit transfer. She was consequently liberated from anguish and reincarnated in a divine domain.⁵ King Bimbisāra saw the souls of his deceased family, who appeared imploring for nourishment due to their lack of focused merit. Following the offering ritual and the dedication of merit, they were released, emanated light, and ascended to celestial regions.⁶ Therefore, whenever we engage in virtuous actions, we ought to donate the merit by reciting: “*Idam no nātīnam hotu, Sukhitā hontu nātakā*”. “May this merit be advantageous to our deceased relatives”. “May they experience joy, be liberated from suffering, and dwell in enduring tranquility.”

2.1.2.7. Rejoicing in Others' Merits (*Pattānumodanā*)

A tiny affluent individual named Cūḷasetthi was avaricious, faithless, and refrained from charitable giving. Upon his demise, he was reincarnated as a hungry ghost. Aware that his daughter Anulā was poised to undertake a virtuous offering, he manifested with the expectation of delighting in the merit to alleviate his pain. Nevertheless, the contributions provided by a cohort of unscrupulous Brahmins lacked any emancipatory impact. Subsequently, motivated by compassion, the monarch of Rājagaha presented gifts to the Buddha and Sangha, dedicating the merit to him. The spectre exuberantly embraced it, promptly transcended the spectral domain, and was reincarnated as a celestial entity experiencing tranquilly in the divine world.⁷

2.1.2.8. Teaching the Dhamma (*Dhammadesanā*)

Offering material possessions yields merit; but, providing the Dhamma confers far more reward. The Dhamma empowers listeners to forsake unwholesome deeds, adhere to the path of righteousness, and achieve nirvana. Both Dhamma instructors and others are permitted to disseminate the Dhamma by publishing and disseminating texts. Disseminating the Dhamma yields merit for future existences and fosters tranquilly and safeguarding in the present, benefitting both oneself and others.

⁴ *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā Sūtra*, Venerable Thich Duc Nghiep, Religion Publications, 2003, p. 64

⁵ Yulanpen Sūtra (Ullambana Sūtra, 盂蘭盆經), Vol. 16, Nos. 685–686, Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Publications, Buddha's Light
Published 2008, p. 30–57

⁶ Ullambana Sūtra, Vol. 25, Taishō Edition, Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Published, 1980, pp. 60–5

⁷ Khuddaka Nikāya – Petavatthu, Vol. IV, “*Stories of the Cūḷasetthi*”, Ubbavagga, Published by Pali Text Society, 1999, p. 20

2.1.2.9. Listening to the Dhamma (*Dhammassavanā*)

The Dhamma, the Buddha's doctrine, enhances wisdom and cultivates erudition (*bahussuta*). Engaging with the Dhamma facilitates comprehension of the path and cultivates significant merit, regardless of one's immediate understanding. Listening to the Dhamma, regardless of complete comprehension, plants the seeds of liberation, facilitating the elimination of greed, hate, and delusion. This establishes the basis for further practice and the achievement of enlightenment.

2.1.2.10. Right View (*Ditthijukamma*).

Right perspective refers to perceiving and comprehending reality accurately. It safeguards us from superstition and erroneous notions. Fundamentally, proper perspective entails the direct comprehension of the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path that leads to cessation - liberation and Nirvāṇa.

Erroneous perspectives distort reality, engendering negligence or detrimental attachments, culminating in adverse karma and suffering. The right view constitutes the cornerstone of wisdom, manifested via insight (*vipassanā ñāṇa*) and refined knowledge and vision (*ñāṇadassana-visuddhi*). It elucidates the fundamental aspects of impermanence, suffering, and non-self, and directs us to adhere to the principles of karma. The Buddha taught that the belief in eternalism (*Sassatavāda*), which posits a permanent self, results in complacency and ignorance. Annihilationism (*Ucchedavāda*), the concept that death signifies finality, results in carelessness and ethical indifference. Both perspectives are erroneous and lead to pain.

To cultivate right view, one must listen deeply, observe attentively, and contemplate thoroughly on body, mind, phenomena, karma, moral causality, good and evil, and the fruits of actions for every deed is governed by one's understanding.

2.1.3. Three Types of Blessings

To become a person of truth, virtue, and beauty, three types of blessings are indispensable: material blessings, moral blessings, and wisdom blessings.

* Material blessings (*Dāna* – charitable giving)

Offering and making donations are methods of cultivating blessings that foster tranquilly and wellness for both body and mind in human and celestial domains. Nevertheless, if one pursues just temporal, contingent accolades, then at the moment of death, attachment will persist, and the cycle of rebirth will continue unabated. Individuals who engage in altruism with the intention of attaining Nirvāṇa understand how to utilise material goods in alignment with the Dharma, without of attachment, and may leave them readily, even to the point of forsaking worldly life to pursue the road. This act of generosity not only generates merits for future existences but also constitutes an initial measure to eradicate yearning, the fundamental cause of suffering as delineated in the Four Noble Truths.

* Moral blessings (*Śīla* – observing precepts)

Precepts are the cornerstone of ethics and the base of spiritual development. Adhering to precepts purifies the body and mind, so creating a basis for knowledge and the achievement of noble outcomes. An individual who adheres to the principles reaps triple advantages: a commendable reputation, esteem and tributes from others, and reincarnation in auspicious realms if enlightenment has not yet been achieved. Precepts like the expansive ocean, the origin from whence virtuous creatures emerge.

*Wisdom Blessings (Meditative Practice)

Wisdom blessings are cultivated via the practice of meditation (*bhāvanā*), a straightforward yet profoundly powerful technique. Meditation soothes the mind, fosters insight (*paññā*), and aids in overcoming ailments and suffering. The meditation experience is characterised by joy, tranquilly, detachment, and culminates in correct perception and emancipation. The Buddha said that to terminate suffering, one must eradicate desire, the

source of saṃsāra. Consequently, a Buddhist practitioner ought to develop generosity, adhere to precepts, and engage in meditation as three essential stages towards freedom.⁸

2.2. The concept of blessings in the Buddhist Canon

2.2.1. The Truth Dhamma (Chon Ly)

The Truth Dhamma is a compilation of teachings by Patriarch Minh Đang Quang, recording his lectures during a decade of disseminating the Dharma in Southern Vietnam. The work consists of 69 issues categorised into two sections: 60 theological themes and 9 volumes of precepts with 114 monastic regulations. This collection is regarded by the Mendicant Order as an essential text for examination and application⁹. In Truth Dhamma, the Patriarch underscores the significance of precepts, asserting: *“Buddhism endures through time due to the precepts. Those who aspire to ascend to higher realms in this life must adhere to the precepts meticulously, since they constitute the foundation of this path.”*¹⁰

Despite the limited availability of Sanskrit and Chinese sources throughout the compilation era, the Chơn Lý offers a thorough examination of essential philosophical concepts, including cosmology, the five aggregates, the six sense faculties, and the twelve links of dependent origination.

The text addresses subjects pertaining to ethics, karmic law, and monastic existence, encompassing: Universal Justice, Enlightenment, The School of Ethics, and The Realm of Heaven.

The Patriarch asserts that commandments serve as a safeguard against the six sense objects and provide the primary criterion for distinguishing between good and wrong, as well as between human and heavenly existence. The seven unique advantages of adhering to commandments are:

- Facilitating enlightenment
- Preventing deviation toward indulgence ✓
- Deliverance from the four evil destinies
- Cessation of afflictions
- Freedom from sensual desires
- Purification of body, speech, and mind
- Leading to two Noble Fruits: Stream-entry (Sotāpanna) and Once-returner (Sakadāgāmi)¹¹

2.2.2. Principles and blessings in the sutra of the Clever and the Ignorant.

In Buddhism, precepts are considered the cornerstone of moral purity and a prerequisite for peace and liberation. The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish (賢愚經), analogous to the Jātaka in the Khuddaka Nikāya, recounts many tales of persons who adhered to precepts even at the expense of their lives.

In the chapter of the novice who upheld the precepts, a young novice (sāmaṇera) is seduced by a laywoman. Resolute in his commitment to purity, he asserts: “It is preferable to perish than to violate the precepts”. He enters his chamber, directs his thoughts to the hallowed ground of Kuśinagara, makes a solemn pledge, and ends his life to maintain his moral integrity. The sūtra states: *“Those who have accepted the precepts must uphold them, even at the expense of their lives; they must not transgress them. The value of an individual who adheres to the precepts with integrity is infinite and limitless.”*¹²

This narrative embodies the elevated essence of moral discipline, resonating throughout several accounts in the Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā and Jātaka, where ethical rules are seen as the fundamental basis of merit and the pathway to freedom.

⁸ Most Venerable Thich Thien Hoa, General Buddhist Studies (5th ed.), Religion Publications, 2006, p. 96

⁹ Patriarch Minh Đang Quang, *The Truth Dhamma*, Ho Chi Minh Publications, 1998, p. 7–9

¹⁰ Patriarch Minh Đang Quang, *The Truth – Bhikkhuyana Precepts*, Ha Noi- Religion Publications, 2006, p. 12

¹¹ Ibid, p. 13 - 5

¹² Venerable Thich Trung Quan (Trans.), *The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, Religion Publications, 2005, Pp. 173–180 ¹³ The Lotus Sutra, Vol.3, Most Ven. Thich Tri Tinh (Trans.), Religion Publication, 2007, Pp. 478 - 481.

2.2.3. Blessings and the Bodhisattva spirit in the Lotus Sutra: The Case of Bodhisattva Sadāparibhūta

The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra, revered as one of the most important Mahāyāna scriptures, was translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in 402 CE. It contains 28 chapters in 7 fascicles¹³. Scholar Vasubandhu asserts that this sūtra embodies the Supreme Vehicle (Mahāyāna). Master Zhiyi considered it the doctrine that includes all Dharma teachings. Nichiren Shōnin saw it as a mahādhāraṇī capable of eradicating karmic impediments and guiding beings to ultimate enlightenment.¹³

Chapter 20, titled “Sadāparibhūta (Never Disparaging Bodhisattva),” describes the tale of an itinerant monk who, upon meeting individuals from the fourfold assembly, would bow and declare: “*I do not presume to disdain you, for you will all attain Buddhahood.*”¹⁴

Notwithstanding many reprimands and being struck with stones, he persevered with equanimity and harboured no animosity. This monk was a former incarnation of the Buddha Shakyamuni, embodying the persistence and compassion characteristic of the Bodhisattva path. This narrative imparts a significant lesson: Puñña is an essential basis for effective Dharma dissemination; without adequate merit, even accurate statements may be overlooked or derided. The depiction of the Never Disparaging Bodhisattva underscores that to adeptly lead others, a practitioner must have merit, insight, and ethical purity.

2.2.4. The Dhammapada¹⁵

The Dhammapada is a component of the Pāli Canon, notably included inside the Khuddaka Nikāya. This compilation was translated by Venerable Thich Minh Chau from Pāli, with a side-by-side comparison of Vietnamese and Pāli, along with annotations on specific phrases. The Dhammapada comprises 26 chapters and 423 verses. It provides instruction appropriate for both monastics and lay practitioners, according to individual abilities and situations. Although concise in expression, its implications are immensely significant. In the subsequent stanza, the Buddha instructed a layperson while residing at Jetavana Monastery:

“*Idha modati pecca modati, kattā puññassa modati. So modati so pamodati, disvā kammaṃ visuddhikaṃ.*”

“*In this moment, he exults; in the future, he will exult.*” In both conditions, the benefactor exults.

*He exults, profoundly exults, Recognising the integrity of his own actions.*¹⁶

The Pāli Canon states that during the Buddha's era, a virtuous layman (upāsaka) resided in Sāvatthī with five hundred lay associates. He had fourteen offspring (seven sons and seven daughters), and the entire family actively engaged in the sixteen categories of virtuous deeds (puñṇakiriyavatthu) with glad emotions. The children alternated in providing charity using a lottery system.¹⁷

Upon being very ill, he summoned the Bhikkhus to expound the Dharma. During the lecture on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta), six celestial chariots from the six heavenly kingdoms manifested, each operated by a deva, proposing to transport him to partake in divine joys. Nevertheless, he only stated: “Please hold on a moment!” “Please hold on a moment!” (alam dāni, alam dāni!), refraining from disrupting the Dharma discourse¹⁸. The Bhikkhus fled, believing he had lost interest. Upon regaining consciousness, he elucidated the events that transpired and urged his children to perpetuate the righteous actions he had undertaken. Subsequent to his demise, he was reincarnated in Tusita Heaven.

When the Bhikkhus enquired of the Buddha, “Venerable One, how can an individual who has led a secular life within a familial context pass away peacefully and be reborn in a blissful realm?” The Buddha stated: “Regardless

¹³ Nguyen Lang, *Vietnamese Buddhist History and Commentary*, Vol. 2, Literature Publications, 2000, p 451–455

¹⁴ *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, Chapter 20, “*Sadāparibhūta Bodhisattva*,” Translated by Most Ven. Thich Tri Tinh, Religion Publications, 2007, p. 478

¹⁵ Dhammapada, Most Ven. Thich Minh Chau (Trans.), 3rd edition, Hanoi - Religious Publications, 2005, p. 143

¹⁶ Ibid, No.18, Chapter on Pairs (Yamakavagga), pp. 21–22

¹⁷ Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā, Commentary on Dhammapada Verse 18. See: Khuddaka Nikāya, Thich Minh Chau, Ho Chi Minh Religious Published, 2006, p 356–7.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 358

of being a layperson or a monastic, if one practices mindfulness and cultivates merit, one will attain happiness in both this life and the next."¹⁹

2.2.5. The Questions of Sutta Milindapañha²⁰ : Merit and Sin in the Causal Relationship - An Example from the Milindapañha A very contentious Pāli work, produced around five centuries post-Buddha's Parinirvāṇa, compiled by Piṭakacūlābhaya and currently categorised under the Theravāda canon, presents a quintessential conversation between King Milinda and the Venerable Nāgasena. This essay exemplifies the integration of philosophical reasoning and the logical question-and-answer approach, distinctly embodying the essence of Theravāda Buddhist teachings.

King Milinda asked a fundamental question: *"Individuals may engage in malevolent actions throughout their lives, yet at the moment of death, they may remember the Buddha, his virtues, or his luminous form, and consequently be reborn in a celestial realm. What is the mechanism behind this phenomenon? Conversely, how can it be claimed that an individual who perpetrates a singular act of homicide may descend into hell?"*²¹

Venerable Nāgasena replied with a helpful analogy: *"If a small stone, akin to a peppercorn, is cast into water, it will undoubtedly submerge. Nevertheless, if numerous substantial stones are placed onto a sizable vessel, it will not submerge. Similarly, an individual who has perpetrated malevolent actions but, at the moment of death, cultivates virtuous thoughts on the Buddha's qualities may be reincarnated in the celestial realms as a result of that ultimate virtuous mental state. Conversely, an individual who has perpetrated a singular immoral act without any accompanying virtue may actually descend into inferior worlds."*²²

This example elucidates the idea of relativity in karma, a significant tenet in the Buddhist philosophy of causality. The mental state at the moment of death can influence the course of reincarnation, overriding other forms of karma, if the mind is deeply and purely focused. This does not diminish the cumulative impact of previous acts, but rather highlights the primary influence of the current mindset and the transforming capacity of beneficial mental attributes.

This viewpoint corresponds with the Abhidhamma's doctrine on karma: *"Kamma is not a predetermined destiny, but is contingent upon its intensity, timing, and supportive conditions (upaniṣaya)."*²³

2.3. Implementing Merit in Everyday Life

According to canonical writings including the Dhammapada, Lotus Sutra, Milindapañha, and The Truth, puñña is not just the result of ethical behaviour but also functions as a fundamental principle for spiritual development and societal welfare. The implementation of merit in everyday life may be comprehended through three primary dimensions:

* **Amassing monetary and social capital:** Through acts of charity, contributions, and assistance to others, humans establish good karmic connections and foster benevolence and virtue. In contemporary circumstances, this might be articulated through philanthropic endeavours, environmental conservation, dissemination of information, or community assistance.

* **Fostering moral and spiritual merit:** Adhering to rules, engaging in meditation, and cultivating ethical behaviour contribute to the purification of the mind, diminish defilements, and promote inner tranquility. In everyday life, lay Buddhists can adhere to precepts as much as feasible, such as engaging in correct discourse, demonstrating kindness, and living with honesty and accountability.

* **Channelling merit towards emancipation:** Merit attains its utmost potential when integrated with knowledge and correct perspective. The Milindapañha underscores that even a minor virtuous idea, when bolstered by knowledge and confidence in the Three Jewels, might result in celestial rebirth or release.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 359

²⁰ Mendis, N.K.G. (Ed.). The Questions of King Milinda: An Abridgement of the Milindapañha, Buddhist Publications Society (BPS), Kandy, Sri Lanka, 2001, pp. 176 -180

²¹ Milindapañha, BPS, 2001, Pp. 176 - 7

²² Milindapañha, BPS, 2001, Pp. 178 - 9

²³ Bhikkhu Bodhi, In the Buddha's Words, Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 150.

Practitioners must transform accrued merit into inner fortitude for spiritual practice, advancing along the Noble Eightfold Path.

In brief, merit constitutes not only the result of virtuous activities but also the cornerstone for a life characterised by happiness, knowledge, and spiritual advancement when nurtured with proper comprehension and genuine intent.

3. CONCLUSION

In Buddhism, the notion of merit serves as a fundamental component of the spiritual journey. It not only enhances present and future enjoyment but also provides crucial support for spiritual development. An analysis of the ten meritorious deeds, the threefold merit, and texts such as the Dhammapada, Lotus Sutra, and Milindapañha reveals that, despite diverse interpretations and practices of merit, its fundamental objective is to facilitate liberation from saṃsāra.

Despite variations in expression throughout Buddhist traditions, the fundamental focus persists on moral awareness, selflessness, and wisdom in the development of merit. Merit should not be viewed just as the exterior accumulation of good actions, but as a manifestation of an inside shift from conditioned virtue to unconditioned insight. This article posits that contemporary Buddhists ought to comprehend and implement the doctrine of merit as an ethical foundation, directing it towards liberation through right view and meditative insight, thereby circumventing the dangers of self-serving merit-seeking and spiritual materialism.

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