

## MERIT & AWARENESS

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When I ask Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (my dharma teacher of almost 30 years) what is the main obstacle for most people in dharma practice, the answer is always “lack of merit,” not enough merit has been accumulated. This is why we practice dharma, to accumulate enough merit. Enough merit for what? So what is merit anyway in dharma terms?

A quick look through a half dozen dharma teachings shows me that often ‘merit’ is said in the same breath as the term “awareness.” In other words, the phrase “merit & awareness” occurs again and again in the Buddhist literature. Sometimes these two terms are also translated as “skillful means & wisdom.” Thus ‘merit’ is synonymous with ‘skillful means’ and ‘awareness’ is synonymous with ‘wisdom.’ More interesting is the fact that these two terms not only occur together but they actually cause one another to appear in the world. How does this work?

“Merit” refers to skillful or meritorious actions that we make as opposed to sloppy or unskillful actions. Doing something properly or skillfully (or kindly, gently) has a different type of effect (dharmically or karmically speaking) than unskillful actions. In other words, skillful actions are meritorious and sloppy actions somehow lack merit. I guess we all know this. That is why skilled labor and skills in general are so valued in our society. Great skill in anything is inherently meritorious, so much more so when it comes to dharma actions like saying a mantra or working on your sitting meditation practice. And now for the kicker.

Not only are skillful dharma actions (or any skillful actions) meritorious, but their precise performance itself is clarifying and causes awareness or clarity to arise in us. Great skill in action, whether watching a ballet or a football receiver, somehow enhances that activity. I like to tell myself that awareness is the aura of our actions, good or bad. We instantly are more aware of skill compared to a poor execution. This is particularly true in the martial arts or, for that matter, any of the arts, sciences, etc. – everything. The more skillful our actions, the more awareness takes place or surrounds it – an aura. Somehow skillful actions create space or an aura around themselves -- awareness. And here is what is marvelous:

Increased awareness makes it easier for us to be more skillful yet, and more skillful actions bring forth even more awareness, and so it goes - recursively. This for me was an incredible concept to learn of, the dharma engine that each practitioner is working to jump start. And like spontaneous combustion or fusion, once this chain reaction is started, it feeds on and propels itself onward. It becomes automatic. The problem for beginning dharma practitioners is getting it started in the first place.

I found it helpful to understand this recursive cycle, and here is how: For years, although I was faithful in my dharma practice, I was too often just putting in the time, kind of waiting my allotted meditation period out until it was over so I could go on with the rest of my day which I was anticipating. I found meditation boring. In other words, there was little (or very little) skillful or meritorious actions taking place on my part and correspondingly little awareness arose as a result. I was waiting for the awareness but, like striking rocks to make a fire, I was not striking the rocks properly or skillfully, and of course there was little to no fire. Only at the time I did not know why I was getting no fire. Too often I was just putting in my time and watching the clock.

Had I understood the above concept, I would have been far, far better off to have had short meditation periods (perhaps more often) in which I actually skillfully participated than those longer ones in which I basically tuned out and noodled through them. To turn the wheel of the dharma, "We" actually have to turn the wheel ourselves. Otherwise our dharma practice will sit there forever with no real change or, as in my case, a change for the worse as I became more jaded and discouraged at the lack of any results. Let me repeat the concept one more time to make sure it is clear.

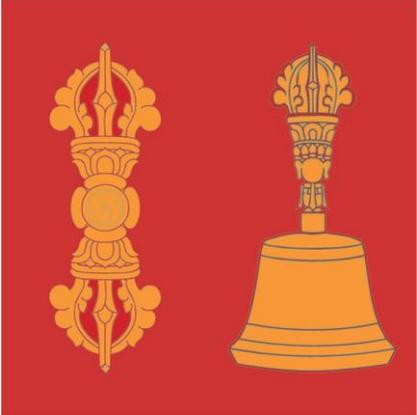
"Merit & awareness" are a dynamic duo that are the one of the keys to proper dharma practice and getting results or 'awareness'. If we do our dharma practice skillfully, say each mantra properly, clearly, cleanly, or when sitting in meditation we gently (but firmly) bring our mind back to the breath (or whatever object) every time we discover we have again been distracted, then increased awareness will indeed arise over time. And with increased awareness comes the opportunity to perform still more-skillful actions, and thus even greater awareness, and ad infinitum.

And this effect is not restricted only to the time we spend practicing on the meditation cushion. Our post-meditation practice, the rest of our day, is an ideal practice ground as well for merit & awareness training. As the Zen practitioners point out so well, we can be skillfully mindful of our every action, like raising a cup of tea to our lips or greeting a fellow being, human or otherwise. There is no end to the opportunities for skillful means in any day and there is no end to the awareness that can arise in return or response. This kind of practice we can do all day long and if done skillfully, the needed merit will accumulate.

According to my dharma teachers, to become aware or enlightened we have to accumulate merit, lots of it. What I am pointing out here is that rote dharma practice (like any other rote practice) will not take us far. The Buddha, a human being like ourselves, pointed out how to become more aware and wake up, but he also made it very clear that we each have to walk the path. No one, not even the Buddha, can enlighten us. We must enlighten ourselves. That's what the Buddha did.

Practicing meritorious or skillful actions will cause authentic awareness to arise, but we have to be there personally in the moment for this to take place. We have to actually do it, moment by moment.

Graphic: Here are the traditional images for Skillful Means and Wisdom, Merit & Awareness. On the left is the Vajra (Tibetan: Dor-Je), also called a "Thunderbolt," which stands for Skillful Means or Merit, and on the right is the Ghanta (Tibetan: Dril-bu) or Bell which represents Wisdom and Awareness.



FB-2