

THE TWO ACCUMULATIONS – MERIT AND AWARENESS

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Throughout the history of Buddhism, in particular Vajrayana Buddhism, there is reference to the “Two Accumulations” which are “Merit” and “Awareness.” Merit and awareness are sometimes translated as “Skillful Means” and “Wisdom.” These two are said to be the key to real progress in dharma practice. But what are they? We need to know.

Merit and awareness are not two unconnected qualities or virtues randomly grouped together but are connected as are action and reaction. One causes the other. Merit creates awareness and greater awareness makes performing meritorious actions easier, which in turn creates even greater awareness, and so on. These two are recursive like mirrors within mirrors within mirrors. They are a chain reaction that once started is unstoppable. However getting that recursion started is what dharma practice is all about. There is the rub as Shakespeare said, getting the ball rolling.

Of course a daily sitting practice is one place where merit can be created which, as mentioned above, leads to greater awareness which allows even more meritorious actions to be performed, and ad infinitum – recursion. But what if we don't find time for practice or don't yet know how to practice. What then?

In this kinky world it can be difficult to feel pure and to perform a pure action or make a pure effort. Our own past shows us up as a hypocrite, making such pure actions even harder for us. How do we break through our own inaction and baggage? How do we purify ourselves enough to get some merit accumulating?

Perhaps the most common answer is “repetition,” performing a ritual of repetitive actions that purifies. Of course this is what mantra and all ritual practices are about, but perhaps we have never learned about this and don't know how to practice. What can we do?

The answer is that we are already doing it, probably just not very efficiently. I want to point out how we do this but it is up to you to get the idea and find where in your life you do this. I can only give you a pointer here. You will have to fill in the blanks with your own experiences.

There are days when we just time out and take ourselves away from whatever we are supposed to be doing or used to doing and just have a non sequitur – an anomaly in the freight-train rush of our life. We do something different. It could be as simple as taking care of something we have been putting off doing like: paying the bills, painting a room, cleaning the attic, mopping the floor, etc. Whatever it is we choose to do at these times it is purifying and often repetitive or mindless compared to the busyness we normally engage in.

That is why dharma practitioners repeat a mantra a million times or perform the action of offering everything good to all beings or whatever it takes, over and over. Remember the “Dharma” is nothing more than the method that the man called Buddha pointed out to us to become aware. “Buddha” means awareness. That is what it is all about. The dharma is not complicated, but we have to make a start somewhere.

And for most of us that means purifying or stopping what we normally do long enough to log

something sincere and open on our books, to create a gap or opening beyond our usual busyness. There has to be a break.

Often we feel better if we do the dishes, mop the floor, and take care of something that has been hanging over us. That is the purifying part. And it is good to keep such actions going, like repeating a mantra or moving the mop back and forth on the kitchen floor, scrubbing the tiles, detailing the car, washing our bodies, etc. It helps if we can catch a break or find an opening and keep that opening open or even expand it. That is what the “Two Accumulations” (merit and awareness) are all about – recursion. You do something “good” or purifying and it puts you into a better space (awareness). With that greater awareness you can see around you how to do whatever you have to do better, and you do. This creates still more awareness and (after a while) the chain reaction is going. It is getting that chain reaction started that is not easy for many of us.

What I am attempting to point out here is not for everyone but just for those of you who get it and see the value in this kind of practice. Those of us who meditate learn to practice like this while sitting on the cushion, but not everyone has time for that or has even been shown how to practice.

Yet all of us can benefit from some form of purification, from removing some of the obscurations that keep us running a rat race and move on to something clearer – something more aware.

There is a lot more to say, but this is already too long. It takes me many words to say something very simple. For this I apologize.

Merit and Awareness. Make a skillful or meritorious action and use the resulting space or awareness to make an even more meritorious actions, and so on. That is how dharma practices starts for each of us. And once going, it fuels itself and becomes incandescent. Getting the fire started is what this blog is about.

Photo: Not by me. Public domain photo. Lovely.

