

CHAPTER 11

Distinctions with Regard to Merit

XI. CHAPTER 11: DISTINCTIONS WITH REGARD TO MERIT

A. Q: HOW SHOULD ONE REPENT, ENTREAT, REJOICE, AND DEDICATE MERIT?

Question: In what way should one carry out repentance, entreating, rejoicing, and dedication? How many times during the course of the day and night should one perform these actions?

B. A: WITH REVERENCE AND PRESSED PALMS, THREE TIMES EACH DAY & NIGHT

Response:

With the right knee touching the ground
and with the right shoulder bared,
place the palms together and, with reverential mind,
do these three times each day and night.

Because these actions are emblematic of reverential behavior, one touches the right knee to the ground, bares the right shoulder, and presses one's palms together. This observance should be carried out at the beginning of the night as one simultaneously pays reverence to all buddhas, repents, entreats, rejoices, and dedicates merit. One does so yet again in this same way in the middle of the night and again at the end of the night.

One proceeds in this same way at the beginning of the day, again in the middle of the day, and again at the end of the day, doing so altogether six times in the day and night, doing so while single-mindedly bringing to mind all buddhas, envisioning them as if they were manifesting right before one's very eyes.

C. Q: WHAT KARMIC RESULT ENSUES FROM DOING THIS?

Question: What karmic result ensues from acting in this way?

D. A: IF ONE DID THIS BUT ONCE, THE MERIT WOULD BE INCALCULABLY GREAT

Response:

If one were to practice this but a single time
and the associated merit were to have physical form,
not even world systems as numerous as the Ganges' sands
would be capable of holding it all.

If one were to carry out this procedure even once and if the resulting merit was given physical form, that merit would be so immense that it

could not be contained even in a measureless, boundless, and inconceivable number of great trichiliocosms equal the number of sands in the Ganges River. This is as described in the "Getting Rid of Karmic Offenses" chapter of *The Three Branches Sutra*:¹⁷⁰

The Buddha told Śāriputra, "Even if a son or daughter of good family made an offering to the Buddhas of a quantity of the seven precious things sufficient to fill up the worlds of great trichiliocosms equal in number to the sands of the Ganges, that merit would still be superseded by the amount of merit created by some other person who entreated the Buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma."

Moreover, in the "Rejoicing and Dedication" chapter of *The [Mahā] prajñāpāramitā [Sūtra]*, the Buddha said:¹⁷¹

It is good indeed, good indeed, Subhūti, that you are able to carry on the work of the Buddha by explaining to the bodhisattvas this dharma of dedicating [merit]. Suppose a bodhisattva were to engage in the following reflection:

Just as all buddhas know and see from root to branch and in terms of substance and signs which causes and conditions serve as the bases for the existence of this merit and these roots of goodness, so too, as I engage in this dedication [of merit], I also accord with what the buddhas know and see.

This person [who carries out dedications in this manner] thereby acquires an immense amount of merit. By way of analogy, even if beings as numerous as those in the worlds of great trichiliocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands were all to achieve perfect adherence to the ten courses of good karmic action, still, the merit gained by that bodhisattva [mentioned above] would be, in its magnitude, the most superior, the most sublime, and the most excellent. It would be matchless, unequaled, and equal to the unequaled.

But, Subhūti, set aside this example of all beings in the worlds of great trichiliocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands achieving perfect adherence to the ten courses of good karmic action. Even if beings as numerous as those in the worlds of great trichiliocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands were all to acquire the four *dhyānas*, when compared to the merit arising from all of this, his merit would still be the most superior, the most sublime, and the most excellent.

So too would this also be the case with regard to the merit that those beings would gain if they acquired the four immeasurable minds, if they acquired the four formless-realm absorptions, if they acquired the five spiritual superknowledges, or if they realized the fruit of the path of the stream enterer, the fruit of the path of the *sakṛdāgāmin*, the fruit of the path of the *anāgāmin*, the fruit of the path

of the arhat, or if they achieved the realization of the *pratyekabuddha's* path. In those cases as well, comparatively speaking, the merit derived from dedications of merit made in accordance with the Dharma would be the most superior, the most sublime, and the most excellent.

But, Subhūti, set aside this example of all the beings in the worlds of great trichiliocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands achieving [all of these accomplishments up to and including] the realization of the *pratyekabuddha's* path.

Suppose instead that, on the one hand, there were a number of beings in the worlds of great trichiliocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands who all brought forth the resolve to attain *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* while, on the other hand, there were a number of beings equivalent to those in the worlds of great trichiliocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands. If one of those bodhisattvas [who had brought forth the resolve], relying on a mind that still seizes upon signs, were to make offerings to all those beings of clothing, food and drink, bedding, and medicines, doing so for kalpas as numerous as the Ganges' sands, using every sort of happiness enhancing gift while making offerings to them, paying reverence to them, and also praising them. Supposing that each and every one of those bodhisattvas all acted in this very same manner, what do you think, Subhūti? Would all of these bodhisattvas gain a great deal of merit because of this, or not?

[Subhūti replied:]

O Bhagavat, they would gain an extremely great amount. Such an amount of merit as this would be beyond the reach of any calculation or analogy. If such a quantity of merit were to be given physical form, it could not be contained even within worlds as numerous as the Ganges' sands.

The Buddha told Subhūti:

Good indeed, good indeed, Subhūti. [Even so], the merit of this bodhisattva guarded and protected by the *prajñāpāramitā* who performs the dedication of roots of goodness in a manner conforming to the nature of dharmas—that merit is such that the merit gained by all of those aforementioned bodhisattvas whose giving involved seizing on signs could not equal even a hundredth of it, a thousandth of it, one ten-thousandth of it, or even one billionth of a *koṭi's* part of it. This comparison would even be beyond the reach of calculation or analogy. And why is that? It is because the giving practiced by those aforementioned bodhisattvas involved mental discriminations seizing on signs.

[Because of this], their merit remains confined entirely within the sphere of what is measurable and calculable.

Also, the "Dedication" of the [Mahā]prajñāpāramitā [Sūtra] records that, in speaking to the devas of the Pure Abodes Heavens, the Buddha said the following:

Let us set aside this case of there being on the one hand beings as numerous as those in the worlds of great trichilocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands who had brought forth the resolve to attain *anuttarasamyakṣambodhi* while on the other hand there is another group of beings as numerous as those in the worlds of great trichilocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands and then each and every one of these bodhisattvas [in the former group] made offerings to all these beings [in the latter group], giving clothing, food and drink, bedding, medicines, and other means of sustenance, freely making such offerings for a number of kalpas as numerous as the Ganges' sands, but doing all of this giving with minds attached to signs.

Devas, [consider instead a case where, on the one hand, there are] all these beings in the worlds of great trichilocosms as numerous as the Ganges' sands who had brought forth the resolve to attain *anuttarasamyakṣambodhi* while on the other hand there was yet another group of beings in the worlds of great trichilocosms as numerous as Ganges' sands who had also brought forth the resolve to attain *anuttarasamyakṣambodhi*.

If one of that latter group of bodhisattvas made offerings to every one of that former group of bodhisattvas, making offerings of clothing, food and drink, bedding, medicines, and means of sustenance, doing so for kalpas as numerous as the Ganges' sands, but doing so with mental discriminations seizing on signs even as, in addition, in this same manner, every one of all of the rest of those bodhisattvas [in this latter group] made offerings to all those bodhisattvas [in the former group], giving clothing, food and drink, bedding, medicines, and means of sustenance, freely making such offerings for kalpas as numerous as the Ganges' sands while also paying reverence to them and uttering their praises, but with all of this giving also involving seizing on signs.

[Now consider yet another case, as follows:] If a bodhisattva guarded and protected by the *prajñāpāramitā* were to consider the roots of goodness of all buddhas of the past, future, and present, including that associated with their qualities of moral precept observance, meditative absorption, wisdom, liberation, and knowledge and vision of liberation, [and the roots of goodness] associated with these same five qualities as acquired by the *śrāvaka* disciples, and

also [the roots of goodness of] common people—if he were to consider all these roots of goodness planted in the past, present, and future, considering them all together, and assessing them all without excluding any—if with respect to all that merit he were to then perform the most supreme, the most sublime, the most excellent rejoicing, unequaled rejoicing, rejoicing that is equal to the unequaled and inconceivable—and if he were then to dedicate the merit arising from that rejoicing to *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, reflecting, “May this merit of mine enable the realization of buddhahood,”—if one were to compare the former merit involving seizing on signs with this latter stock of merit, it could not equal even a hundredth part, a thousandth part, a ten-thousandth part, or even the smallest fraction of a *koṭi*’s part. The comparison is such that it would be beyond the reach of calculation or analogy. Why is this so? This is because the giving done by that former group of bodhisattvas involved mental discriminations seizing on signs.

Furthermore, suppose that on the one hand there was a group of beings as numerous as those in all worlds in great trichiliocosms as numerous as the Ganges’ sands who had brought forth the resolve to attain *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* and who practiced good physical karma, good verbal karma, and good mental karma, while [on the other hand] there was yet another group of beings as numerous as those in all the worlds in great trichiliocosms as numerous as the Ganges’ sands who had also brought forth the resolve to attain *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, [doing so with such solidity of resolve that], even if they were scolded, reviled, and cursed for kalpas as numerous as the Ganges’ sands, they would still be able to endure this for kalpas as numerous as the Ganges’ sands even as they continued with physical and mental vigor to rid themselves of every form of indolence and focus their minds in *dhyāna* concentration free of scattered thoughts, but doing so while still seizing on signs. The merit of those [described in both these latter cases], would still not compare with that of the single bodhisattva who carried out his dedication of merit in a manner conforming to the nature of dharmas, for his merit would be superior.

Therefore, regarding your earlier question as to what benefit results from these practices [involving repentance, entreating, rejoicing, and dedication], one gains a mass of merit of such magnitude as this. Therefore, if someone wishes to gain such an immeasurable, boundless, and inconceivable mass of merit, he should practice this repentance, entreating, rejoicing, and dedication, not sparing even his own body and life and not caring about receiving offerings or enjoying fame, but rather always diligently devoting himself to these practices both by day and by night.

E. Q: WHY HAVE YOU NOT DISCUSSED THE MERIT ARISING FROM REPENTANCE?

Question: You have still only described the merit derived from entreating, rejoicing, and dedication of merit. Why have you not discussed the merit involved in repentance?

F. A: THE MERIT ARISING FROM REPENTANCE IS THE GREATEST

Response: Among all of these sources of merit, the merit associated with repentance is the greatest. Because one is thereby able to get rid of the offenses constituting one's karmic obstacles, one therefore becomes able to skillfully practice the bodhisattva path and practice entreating, rejoicing, and dedication of merit, doing so in a manner that is conjoined with and no different from the realization of emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness.

Additionally, repentance is comparable to some wish-fulfilling jewel through which one is able to obtain whatever one wishes. As the Buddha said:

If someone wishes to be reborn within a great brahmin-caste family, within a great *kṣatriyan*-caste family, or within a great *vaiśya*-caste clan, he should repent of his karmic offenses, concealing none of them, and vowing not to repeat them.

If someone wishes to be reborn in the Heaven of the Four Heavenly Kings, in the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven, in the Yāma Heaven, in the Tuṣita Heaven, in the Nirmāṇarati Heaven, or in the Paramirmita Vaśavartin Heaven, in those cases as well, he should carry out the repentance of karmic offenses, concealing none of them, and vowing not to repeat them.

If someone wishes to be reborn in the Brahma Heaven or anywhere on up to the station of neither perception nor non-perception, this person too should repent of karmic offenses in this very same way, concealing none of them, and vowing not to repeat them.

If someone wishes to gain the fruit of the stream enterer, the fruit of the *sakṛdāgāmin*, the fruit of the *anāgāmin*, or the fruit of arhatship, he too should carry out this repentance of karmic offenses.

If someone wishes to gain the three clear knowledges,¹⁷² the six types of psychic power, or the powers of sovereign mastery associated with the *śrāvaka* disciple path, or if he wishes to reach the far shore of perfection in the meritorious qualities associated with the *śrāvaka* disciple path, in these cases too, he should carry out repentance of karmic offenses in this manner.

If someone wishes to become a *pratyekabuddha*, in this case too, he should carry out repentance of karmic offenses in this manner.

If someone wishes to gain the wisdom of omniscience, inconceivable wisdom, unimpeded wisdom, or unsurpassable wisdom, in

these cases too, he should carry out repentance of karmic offenses in this manner, concealing none of them, and vowing not to repeat them.

Therefore, one should realize that repentance has great karmic effects.

G. Q: HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT REPENTANCE GETS RID OF KARMIC OFFENSES?

Question: You claim that repentance allows one to eliminate the karmic offenses that create karmic obstacles. However, another sutra states: “The Buddha told Ānanda, ‘If one intentionally commits a karmic act, one is certainly bound to undergo its retribution.’”

Additionally, the Abhidharma states, “The causes and conditions involved in karmic acts are not empty. Their retributions are neither lost nor extinguished.”

Furthermore, it states in the sutras that beings all belong to their karma, that they all exist on the basis of their karma, that they depend upon and abide within their karma, that beings follow their karma, and that everyone individually undergoes their own corresponding karmic retribution, whether that be present-life retribution, retribution undergone in the next life, or retribution undergone in subsequent lives.¹⁷³

Also, in *The Karmic Retribution Sutra*, King Yāma says to beings, “Tut! You beings! These karmic offenses of yours were not created by your parents, by devas, by *śramaṇas*, or by brahmins. You created them yourselves and so you should undergo retribution for them yourselves.”

Furthermore, in “The Verse of the Worthies and Āryas,” it says:

The true Dharma is like vajra.

The general of karmic power remains unconquerable.

Even though I have now already attained buddhahood,

I would still be bound to undergo retribution for bad karma.

Additionally, the Buddha said:

The great seas and the famous mountains,
the hills, the trees, the forests,
the earth, the water, fire, wind, and such,
as well as the sun, the moon, the stars and constellations—

Once they reach the time of the kalpa’s burning,
all without exception will come to an end.

Karma, however, even for countless kalpas,
always abides and never is lost.

You have encountered the one replete with all the marks,
the omniscient one, the teacher of men.

As for the karmic offenses committed in the past,
his resulting retributions have already been repaid.

Now, although you have succeeded in meeting the Buddha,
in ending the defilements, and in attaining the fruits of the Ārya,
because of residual causes and conditions,
slivers of wood are still able to penetrate the body.

Therefore one should not claim that repentance gets rid of karmic offenses.

H. A: ALTHOUGH NOT ELIMINATED ENTIRELY, THEY ARE GREATLY REDUCED

Response: I did not claim that if one repents, then offense karma is entirely extinguished so that there is no resulting karmic retribution. I said that if one repents of one's karmic offenses, then [their retribution] may be lightened and undergone in a short period of time. Therefore, a verse on repentance says, "If I should fall into the three wretched destinies, I pray that I might instead undergo [the retribution] in a human body."

Additionally, in *The Sutra on the Wisdom Seal of the Tathāgata*, it states that the Buddha informed Maitreya, saying:

Bodhisattvas who, with deep-seated aspirations, delight in [the prospect of attaining] *anuttarasamyakṣaṃbodhi* may still have karmic offenses whereby they should otherwise undergo retribution in the wretched destinies. When these karmic offenses have become lighter, they may then be bound in later lifetimes:

- To receive an ugly physical form;
- To be much afflicted by sickness;
- To have no awe-inspiring personal presence;
- To be born into a lower class family, into a poor family, into a family in which wrong views are dominant, or into a family supporting itself with a deviant livelihood;
- To be born into a place contrary to their wishes or a place beset with many worries;
- To be born into a country that becomes destroyed, a village that becomes destroyed, a family compound that becomes destroyed, or a circumstance where whatever they love becomes destroyed;
- To be unable to encounter a good spiritual guide;
- To never be able to hear the Dharma;
- To be unable to receive any means of support, or, if they acquire it, it is coarse, inferior, and always inadequate for self-sustenance;

To have the ability to inspire the faith and respect of those who are of inferior or base character, but to never be able to inspire the faith and respect of great men;

To have it happen that, whenever they cultivate the accumulation of merit, they encounter a multitude of hindrances and end up being unsuccessful in the attempt;

To have all of their faculties be dim and dull;

To have it be that, whenever they practice *dhyāna*, their mind is subject to confusion;

To be unable to gain the qualities of an awakened mind free of contaminants;

To be unable to understand the correct import of the Dharma of the sutras;

And so forth, including even experiencing nightmares, thereby undergoing [in these various ways] the retribution [that would otherwise entail descent into] the wretched destinies.¹⁷⁴

Additionally, the Buddha stated:¹⁷⁵

If a person has a minor karmic offense, he may be able to undergo the retribution in this present life, but if that karmic offense increases in its magnitude, he will be bound to fall into the hells.

What is meant by this statement that a small karmic offense in the present life might increase in magnitude to the point that one is then bound to fall into the hells? It could be that someone fails to cultivate [the actions of] the body, fails to cultivate observance of the moral precepts, fails to cultivate qualities of mind, fails to cultivate wisdom, and also remains bereft of great intentions. This is a person who, if he commits even a minor karmic offense, may become bound to fall into the hells.

What is meant by the statement that this person with a karmic offense entailing retribution in the present life may avoid falling into the hells provided that his karmic offenses do not increase in magnitude? This refers to someone of this sort who cultivates [the actions of] the body, cultivates observance of the moral precepts, cultivates qualities of mind, cultivates wisdom, and also possesses great intentions unconstrained by hindrances. If someone of this sort has karmic offenses, but they do not increase in their magnitude, their retribution will occur in the present life.

Suppose for example that someone mixed a pint of salt into a small container of water. He would then find it to be undrinkable. But if another person casts a pint of salt into a large pond, he would not find its water the least bit salty, how much the less would he find it undrinkable. What is the reason for this? It is because the volume

of water is great while that of the salt is but little. So too it is with karmic offenses.

Accordingly, we have the following verses:

When a pint of salt is thrown into an immense pond,
its flavor remains no different,
However, if one instead mixes it into a small container of water,
the harshness of the salt makes the water undrinkable.

This is analogous to there being a person with a great stock of merit
who has but few karmic offenses
and who is not bound to fall into the wretched destinies,
but rather undergoes mild retribution under other conditions
while there is another person with only a scant amount of merit
who has committed but few karmic offenses that,
because his mental resolve is but narrow and small,
is caused by those karmic offenses to fall into the wretched destinies.

If someone's physical vitality (lit. "fire") is weak in its strength,
when he eats but a little of something difficult to digest,
although this person doesn't die,
his body undergoes much suffering.

If someone's physical vitality is strong,
when he eats but a little of something difficult to digest,
such a person never dies from it
and undergoes only a minor amount of suffering.

If the vitality of one's goodness, merit, and wisdom is weak,
and he has committed but few bad karmic offenses,
there is nothing to save him from these karmic offenses,
and hence they are able to cause his descent into the hells.

In the case of someone possessed of great merit,
even though he may have done bad things involving karmic offenses,
they may not compel him to fall into the hells,
for he may instead undergo only mild present-life retribution.

Take for example the case of Aṅgulimāla.
Although he murdered many people
and also wished to harm his mother and the Buddha,
he still attained the path of arhatship.

The principle of undergoing only mild retribution in this present life is also illustrated by Ajātaśatru who killed his father, the King, a man who had already attained enlightenment. Through causes and conditions having to do with the Buddha and Mañjuśrī, this grave karmic offense resulted in only relatively mild retribution.

[This principle is also illustrated by] the case of “Poisonous Snake Man.” When he was born, it rained blood. Afterward, as he grew up, if he wished to kill some person, he only needed to glare at him, whereupon they would immediately fall dead. If he so much as blew his breath on someone, then too, they would fall dead. Because of this, the people of the time called him “Breath Blower.”

When this man’s life was about to come to an end, Śāriputra went to his abode, whereupon he became angry and glared at Śāriputra. Even so, this did not cause Śāriputra to fall dead. He then blew his breath onto Śāriputra, but that did not cause him to fall dead, either. Rather, the radiance of Śāriputra’s body simply shone ever brighter.

When this happened, his mind immediately became pure and he gazed at Śāriputra, scanning him up and down seven times. Based on these causes and conditions, after he died, he was born seven times up in the heavens and seven times back in the human realm and became bound to become a pratyekabuddha at that time when the human lifespan extends to forty thousand years. Then his body will become the color of gold, whereupon the people of that time will mistake him for a mass of gold and will attempt to hack away chunks of it. His life will then immediately come to an end and he will enter nirvāṇa.

This is also illustrated by the case of King Aśoka who, having used his troops to subdue the continent of Jambudvīpa, was responsible for killing eighteen thousand palace courtiers [in those conquered domains]. However, because, as a child in a previous life, he had gifted the Buddha with a lump of clay, he was later moved to erect eighty thousand stupas, always listened to and accepted the Dharma taught to him by great arhats, and later attained the enlightenment of the stream enterer. This is yet another instance of being able to undergo mild retribution while still abiding in a human body.

In instances where one undergoes [retribution for] karmic offenses in this way, it is when one has practiced many meritorious deeds while also being possessed of a vast and immense resolve. Then, because one has accumulated all manner of merit, he does not fall into the wretched destinies.

Therefore, as for the challenge that you presented earlier [with regard to the teaching that], if one repents of karmic offenses, they will then be completely extinguished so that there is no resulting karmic retribution—[that challenge] is erroneous. Furthermore, if one claims that karmic offenses cannot be extinguished at all, then one would be unable to believe the Buddha’s statement in the Vinaya that, if one repents, one may thereby get rid of one’s offenses. This matter is not as

you have claimed. Therefore, one should indeed repent of the karmic offenses that create karmic obstacles.