

# Is it Really Possible to Transfer of Merit?



S. Dhammika  
Essays on Buddhist Doctrines

## Is it Really Possible to Transfer of Merit?



I read Prof. Marasinghe's article 'The Great Betrayal of Theravada Buddhism' (The Island, 20/5/2020) with interest and would like to make some observations about it. While he sees some of the doctrinal innovations he mentions as betrayals of the Buddha's Dhamma I think it might be more helpful to see them as inevitable evolutions that all systems of thought go through as situations change. It should also be pointed out that the Buddha was not entirely hostile to rituals and pujas. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta he countenances the offering of red paste and incense at stupas and the worship of stupas which would have taken the form of making offerings and perhaps chanting some devotional verses. The professor will also be aware that the Buddha confirmed to the brahman Janussoni that food offered to the departed does actually go to them and sustain them (A.V,269). Exactly what the Buddha meant by this can be discussed at another time.

Rituals are an integral part of life - shaking hands, standing up for the national anthem, addressing the speaker of parliament in a particular manner, judges wearing 18th century wigs - these are all rituals and they have certain psychological effects, they transmit certain ideals without the use of words. In religion at least, rituals only become problematic when we give them a meaning that they do not have or when they contradict clear and important doctrinal truths.

Prof. Marasinghe mentioned in his article problems with the popular ritual of transferring merit and I would like to take this opportunity to say something about this. The transference of merit is the belief that it is possible to do good and then 'transfer' the kammic result (vipāka) of that good to a person who has passed away. This belief is current in all countries where Theravada prevails, is almost universally believed but clearly and seriously contradicts the Buddha's teachings.

Medieval Theravada gave what could only be called a 'mercantile' slant to merit (puñña). Like money or some other commodity, you can earn merit, you can save it up, you can even transfer it to someone else's account. The commentary to the Dhammapada even claims that a person can sell their merit or buy more merit from someone who has extra to spare! The notion of transferring merit contradicts the doctrine of kamma which teaches that it is our intentional actions that have an effect on us and that each of us is responsible for what we do. It also negates moral causation. For if it were possible to transfer the result of the good we do to others, it must likewise be possible to transfer the result of the evil we do to others, and thereby avoid its consequences. It is also worth pointing out that before the Buddha was awakened Māra tried to undermine his efforts by telling him that it would be better to just make merit and lead a good life. The Buddha rejected this temptation saying: 'I do not have even the slightest need for merit.' (Sn. 427-431) Likewise, someone who is sincerely and diligently practicing the Dhamma is already creating all the merit they need by their commitment to the Dhamma.

It seems that there was a long struggle in the history of Buddhism to clarify the concept merit which those who understood the Dhamma eventually lost. As Prof. Marasinghe correctly mentions, one of the points condemned during the Third Council was the notion of transferring merit. But several things the Buddha taught contradict it too. He said: 'By oneself is evil done, by oneself is evil shunned, by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one can purify another' (Dhammapada 165). He reiterated the same point in the Sutta Nipāta, saying: 'When they are overcome by death and are going from here to the next world, the father cannot assist the son, any more than other relatives can' (Sn. 579). In the Devadūta Sutta the Buddha quotes Yama approvingly saying: 'You did this evil action and you alone will experience its results.' The Khuddakapāṭha 9 says that merit is a treasure that cannot be stolen and presumably cannot be given either. The Jātaka says: 'One makes one's own good fortune. One makes one's own misfortune. For good fortune or lack of it cannot be made by another for another.' In his Buddhacarita the great Buddhist poet Ashvaghosa says: 'It is impossible for one to do good and then give it to another, even if one wants to the other cannot receive it. The results of one's own acts are not destroyed, they are experienced by oneself, but that the effect of what one has not done can be experienced is false.'

What the early Buddhists did teach was the idea of doing good on behalf of, or in the name of, another and then giving them the opportunity of rejoicing in that act of goodness. The term *puññanumodana* is

persistently and incorrectly said to mean 'transference of merit' and yet it simply does not mean that. Puñña = goodness or merit; anumodati = to be happy about something or to rejoice in it. The theory behind this practice works something like this. If I send a friend a birthday card, when he or she receives it and reads of my blessings and best wishes, they will probably feel happy. Nothing has been 'transferred' to them. Rather, knowing that I am thinking fondly of them on their birthday fills them with delight and happiness. Likewise, if we do something good and then tell someone that we have done it on their behalf, we create for them the opportunity to rejoice.

The early Buddhists even taught that it is possible to do this to a person who has died. If a recently deceased person has not yet been reborn and is still in the in-between state (antarabhava), he or she may still be aware of or in some sense sensitive to their loved ones and what they are doing. If we do some charitable or noble deed and then announce that we have done it in the name of the deceased, they may come to know this and be filled with joy. Although the practice of dedicating good to a deceased person was not taught by the Buddha, it is not contrary in any way to his teachings.

If the notion of transferring merit was influenced by a 'mercantile' attitude, then it is also true to say that exactly what merit is has been influenced by a 'materialist' one. If you ask someone what merit is they will probably say it is good or goodness. But if you then ask: "But what exactly is it? A thing, a type of energy or a wave, a ray perhaps, or maybe

small particles? They simply won't know what to say. Chances are they have never thought about it. But if it can be earned, accumulated and given to others, it must have some kind of substance. In reality, merit is nothing beyond happiness created by having done something good and wholesome. In its simplest terms it is an experience, a positive experience. As soon as this is understood the notion of transferring merit fades and the idea of rejoicing in merit makes sense. It is time learned monks stopped saying: 'We are going to transfer merit to the deceased' and correctly say: 'We are going to give the departed the opportunity to rejoice in the good we have done.'