

THE SHIPWRECK (Silanisamsa Jataka)

There was once a man who was a student of the Buddha Kassapa, who was the Buddha living on Earth before the Buddha of our time known as Gautama Buddha or Shakyamuni Buddha. So, this disciple of the Buddha Kassapa was a Buddhist of very ancient times, many thousands of years ago. He put into practice the Dharma that Buddha Kassapa had taught.

He had an acquaintance who was a barber, who cut hair and shaved and trimmed beards for a living. The barber was very successful in his business and became quite wealthy. He even owned a small ship. One day, he decided to go on a voyage on his ship across the sea to India. It would take several days to get there. His wife said to him,

“On such a long and dangerous journey, you really should travel with a friend who is wise and who would be able to help you in whatever circumstances that could arise.”

She thought immediately of the Buddhist man, and sent a messenger to request that he come quickly to accompany her husband on his journey. The Buddhist soon arrived at the barber’s house, and the two men packed some food, clothes and other necessities for their trip. The two men boarded the ship and began their journey.



Everything was going well until a storm arose after a week at sea. The winds started whipping the sails and the ship started to rise up high and pitch down low as it rode over the large waves. The rain was streaming down and the men struggled to roll up the sails so the boat wouldn’t toss and turn so much. But even after the sails were tied up, the ship tossed and turned with extreme force on the huge waves. And there was water everywhere – rain from the sky and the spray from the waves. Soon the men noticed that a lot of water was spraying over the sides of the ship,

smacking hard against the deck and flowing over it. The ship started leaning heavily to one side. Waves continued to crash against the ship so hard that some of the wood planks of the ship's hull started loosening and breaking off. As the ship filled with water and started to sink into the sea, the men had only one way to save themselves – to jump over the side.

They jumped into the raging sea and gasped for breath, frantically trying to keep afloat as they were tossed around like toys among the roaring waves. They were getting exhausted, and searched for something to hang onto. They spotted a plank that had broken off the ship, and made their way to it. Finally, they grabbed hold of it, and, panting desperately for breath, hung on for dear life.

The storm began to calm down, the waves were not so wild, and they looked for any sign of land around them. They saw the faint outline of some land in the distance, and with all the strength they had left, they started kicking their feet and paddling toward the land while clinging to the wooden plank.

Finally, utterly exhausted, they floated as the waves washed them toward the shore. They were so relieved to feel the warm sand underneath their feet! But it was only a tiny island. There was no hope of finding any people who might offer them food. The barber was feeling really hungry and after a little rest, he strode off to see what he could find to eat. He saw some birds, and as the birds didn't know the danger of a human being, they just



sat there while he walked up, grabbed them, and killed them. With some sticks and dry grass he made a fire and roasted the birds over it. He generously offered some of the meal to the Buddhist, who replied,

“No thank you, I've had enough.”

Perhaps the Buddhist meant that he wasn't hungry. But that was unlikely, as they had been battling the storm and sea for many long hours. More likely, he didn't want to eat the birds due to his compassion for them and for the very hungry barber, and his mind was focused not on hunger but on the hopelessness of their situation, alone on the deserted island. He thought,

“In this place there is no help for us except the Three Jewels.”

So he thought deeply about the blessings of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. His mind was so clear and concentrated on the Buddha, his teachings, and the people who practice his teachings, that he was soon in a deep, blissful meditation.



Meanwhile, there was a great serpent king, a royal Naga, who lived on the island. Nagas are very sensitive beings with supernatural powers who cannot be seen by ordinary people.

The Naga king could feel the intensity of the Buddhist man's meditation and could sense the goodness of his character. The royal Naga immediately felt a strong inspiration to help this noble being. With his immense supernatural powers, he could change his body into any form, and he turned his body into a ship to save the Buddhist man's life. The ship was filled with food, blankets, clothes and other items that would be necessary for the man's comfort.

A spirit of the sea appeared on the ship as the skipper, one who operates it. The masts of the ship holding up the sails were sapphire blue, the ropes were silver color, and the wooden planks on the deck looked golden.

The sea spirit stood on the deck and cried out, “Any passengers for India?”

The Buddhist man responded, “Yes, that’s where we are bound for!”



The sea spirit said with a welcome smile, “Come on board then!”

The Buddhist man and the barber waded out in the water to the ship. The Buddhist man clung to a rope ladder dangling from the deck, and climbed aboard. As he alighted on the deck, he said to the sea spirit, who was pulling up the ladder,

“My friend the barber is coming too. Please let down the rope ladder for him!”

The sea spirit replied, “You may come, but not he.”

The Buddhist man was puzzled. “Why not?” he asked.

“He is not a man of the virtuous life, that’s why,” responded the sea spirit, “I brought this ship for you, not for him.”

The Buddhist man felt great compassion for his friend, who had neither learned Dharma nor developed many virtues (good qualities), and announced immediately, in a loud voice,

“Very well, the gifts I have given, the virtues I have practiced, the powers I have developed – I give him the results of all of them!”

With that statement, the Buddhist man dedicated all of his merits, all of his good karmas, to his friend.

The barber, standing in the water, heard his friend’s generous offer and said, “I thank you, master!” Although he was so wealthy and successful in business, he regarded the Buddhist as far superior for his great virtues and generosity.

“Now,” said the sea spirit to the barber, “I can take you aboard.”

He dropped the rope ladder for the barber to climb aboard and then went about his tasks of adjusting the sails to begin their voyage. With the Buddhist and the barber sitting safely on deck, the sea spirit sailed the ship to India, entering the Ganges river and sailing all the way up the river to the famous holy city of Benares, which is now called Varanasi.



When they arrived, the sea spirit, by his supernatural power, created many gold coins that would be enough for the two men to live on and to travel back home, and then gave them some parting words:

“Keep company with the wise and good. If this barber had not been in the company of this holy man, he would have died in the middle of the sea.”

He continued,

“See the result of selflessness, virtue and practicing Dharma! A serpent turns himself into a ship

and takes the good man over the sea. Make friends only with good people. Making friends with a good person, the barber could get to safety.”

The sea spirit then rose up in mid-air and went back to his home, taking along with him the Naga king, who resumed his serpent form as the ship disappeared.

QUESTIONS:

1. What was the good quality of the Buddhist man that the barber's wife thought was important when she chose him to go with her husband on the long journey? (he was wise and would be able to help her husband)
2. When they reached the island, what did the Buddhist think was their only hope? (the Three Jewels: the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha)
3. Why did the Naga king want to help the Buddhist man? (he had a good character and intense meditation)
4. Why did the sea spirit not want to let the barber on the ship? (he didn't develop many virtues and didn't learn Dharma)
5. What did the Buddhist do so the barber could get on the ship? (he offered all of his merits, his good karmas, to the barber)
6. What did the sea spirit teach about friends? (to make friends only with good people)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Sharing merit:

The Buddhist man shared all of his good karmas, all the results of the virtues he practiced, including generosity, to the barber.

He shared them immediately, without thinking about it.

Why? Because of his compassion for the barber and his generosity.

We call that “dedicating merits” or “offering merits” to others.

What are “merits”?

Merits include good deeds. Can you think of some examples? Being kind, helping others, being generous.

Merits also include Buddhist virtues. Can you think of some Buddhist virtues, or good qualities? Patience, tolerance, honesty, forgiving others, admitting our mistakes, and self-control.

And merits include Buddhist practices. What Buddhist practices do you do? Prayers, meditation, mindfulness, and learning Dharma, like what we are doing right now!

Actually, merits include anything we say or do with love, with a good heart.

Who do we offer merits to?

In the story, the Buddhist offered his merits to his friend the barber.

Similarly, we can offer merits to someone who is suffering, in need of help. We can offer merits to loved ones who have passed away, so they have a good rebirth into a happy new life.

We also offer merits to all beings, or all “sentient beings” – that means all beings who are conscious; who are born, die, and suffer; who live in any of the 6 realms of samsara – humans, animals, gods, hungry ghosts, asuras, and beings in hell-worlds.

If we give our merits to others, then don't we lose them?

It seems logical that if we give everything away, we have nothing left for ourselves.

So might seem that we should just dedicate a few of our merits, not all of them.

But that isn't what the Buddhist man did in the story.

He offered all of his merits.

And what happened - did he lose all of his good luck?

Did the barber get all the good luck instead? Did he go to India alone with the sea spirit, instead of the Buddhist? No!

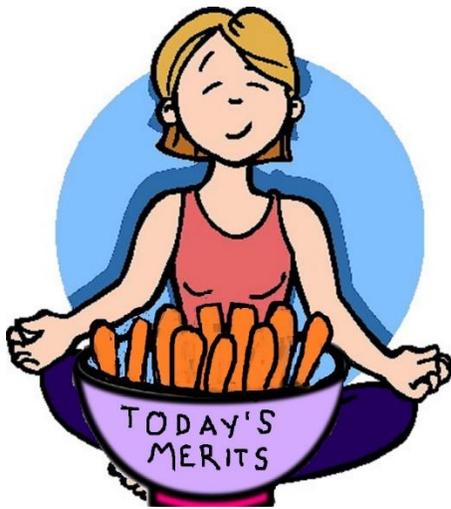
The Buddhist was still just as fortunate.

He didn't lose his merits even after he gave them all away.

Plus, sharing his merit, being generous and compassionate, gave him even more merit!

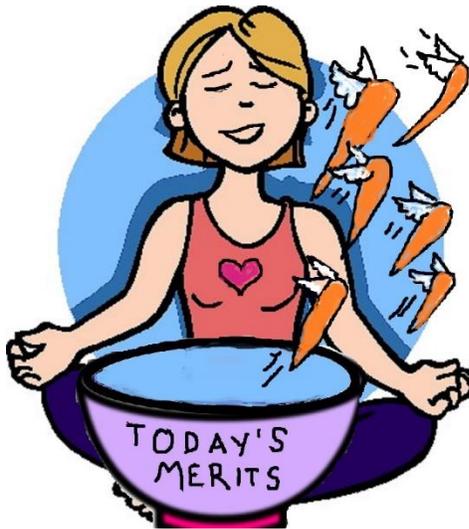
He was extra lucky in having his life saved, going to India with his friend, and receiving gold coins to spend there.

Dedicating our merits isn't like a math problem, where, if we earn 10 merits and give them all away, we are left with zero merits.



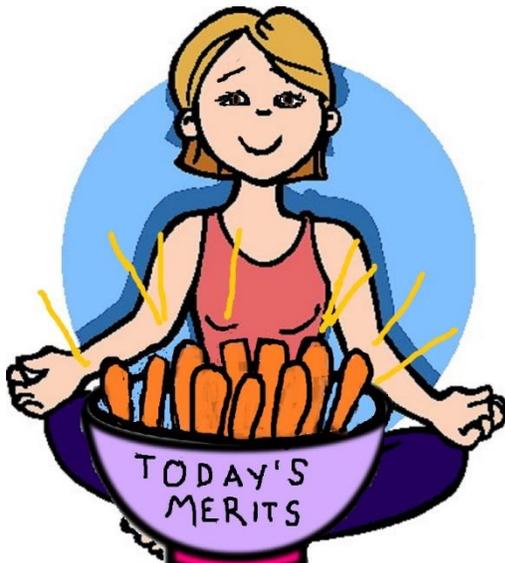
So we offer all our merits to others, not just some of our merits.

When we give them away, then we don't become arrogant, too proud and attached to them, thinking, "I have more merits than others."



By offering all our merits, we practice generosity, not being stingy with our merits.

And we practice compassion, wanting to remove the suffering of others.



And we don't lose the merits that we share with others!

Even though we gave them away, we still have the same merits, plus the merit of having been generous in sharing them!

When and how do we offer merits?

When we do a Dharma practice, such as chanting, meditating, listening to a Dharma talk, or at the end of Dharma class, we usually chant a “dedication of merit” at the end of the practice.

When we do a special good deed, such as making an offering to a temple, or giving food to the poor, we dedicate the merit afterward.

And at the end of the day, before we go to bed, we can dedicate the merits of everything that we did with love, every good thing we did that day.

We can do a particular chant to dedicate merit, or just wish that your merits be of benefit to all beings, that they become happy and peaceful.

Also, there are certain ceremonies to offer merits.

For example in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, family members do a special chant while pouring water into a small bowl or cup until it is full and the water runs over the edge, to offer merits to their loved ones who have passed away.

People may light a butter lamp or incense at a shrine to offer merits to loved ones.

Or families may request a monk to perform a puja ceremony to offer merits to their loved ones.