

Rich Generosity

Master Sheng Yen on transferring merit

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When a candle is lit in a dark room, it illuminates the room to some extent, but its power is limited. But if you use the same candle to light another candle, the total brightness increases. If you continue to do this, you can fill the room with brilliant illumination. The idea of transferring merit to others is like this. If we keep our own light selfishly hidden, it will only provide a limited amount of illumination. But when we share our light with others, we do not diminish our own light. Rather, we increase the amount of light available to all. Therefore, when others light our candle, we issue forth light. When out of gratitude we use our candle to light other people's candles, the whole room gets brighter. This is why we transfer merit to others. This kind of light is continuous and inexhaustible.

When we achieve a mind of gratitude and dedicate ourselves to helping others, we can practice generosity. We can be generous with our wealth, with ourselves, and with the Dharma. In some ways, giving wealth is the easiest. If we consume less and live more frugally, we can give away what we save.

It is also useful to remember that the nature of giving is not necessarily dependent on the size or the value of the gift. Once, the Buddha was about to teach the Dharma to a congregation in the forest, but it got dark. Several people offered their lamps, but there was a homeless woman whose only possession was an alms bowl, which she offered to serve as an oil lamp. On realizing this, the Buddha exclaimed to his congregation that the old lady's virtue was the most excellent, as she had offered her total wealth, the begging bowl. By making her offering, do you think she lost anything?

So when out of gratitude we dedicate ourselves to benefit others, this is practicing generosity or giving. This is something we can learn. Some people think by giving everything away, you end up with nothing. But the Dharma is an inexhaustible well. However much you give of it, you can always go back for more, because in this well the more you take from it, the higher the water will rise. As long as you give the Dharma to nourish others, it will be there. As long as you are alive and are able to practice, this will be true. Being alive, you can learn more and more, and give more and more. Being alive, you can also take time to rest and recover, then go back to the source. This is how giving the Dharma works.

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