

# Making Merits (Puñña) in Modern Myanmar Society - Will It Stand The Test Of Time?

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## Summery

About 90% of the population in Myanmar follows the Theravāda Buddhist religion. Earning merits is traditionally the basis for day-to-day behaviour and is therefore not only of high religious importance but also pervades the Myanmar culture and has social effects for the present society. The earning of merits (*puñña*) is highly recommended in three central discourses in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Buddha Gotama. “Of all the concepts central to Buddhism, merit (*puñña*) is one of the least known and least appreciated in the West.” (1) Earning merits can be seen as the heart of ethics for lay persons in Myanmar. The word *kutho/ kusala* (karmically wholesome, good, morally beneficial) is more common in Myanmar and has to be understood in almost the same way as *puñña*. The great majority of the Buddhists in Myanmar accept generosity and moral behaviour as the basis for meditation. These three factors are seen as three grounds for merit-making. That is why in this paper merit and its content will be explained by using the original sources of the Pāli scriptures. This should enable the reader to bring into line his observations inside the country and acquire a better understanding of them.

## Key Words

Theravāda Buddhism, merit, ethics for lay persons, traditional religious practice

## Puñña in the Tipiṭaka and the commentaries

The earning of merits *puñña* is highly recommended in several central discourses in the Sutta Piṭaka of the Buddha Gotama. The Sutta Piṭaka is one of the three parts of the Tipiṭaka, which is the traditional term for the Buddhist scriptures. The Sutta Piṭaka can be subdivided again into five Collections. In the Gradual Collections (Aṅguttara Nikāya) (2) three bases of meritorious action are mentioned. In the Collection of Long Discourses (Dīgha Nikāya) (3) three bases for the expectation of benefit can be found, in the Short Discourses (Itivuttaka) (4) three grounds for good works are recommended.

At this point I wish to highlight the content of these three factors. It is given in a precise way by the Buddha Gotama. “There are, O monks, three ways of making merit. What three? There are ways of making merit by giving, by virtue and by the development of meditation.” (5) The Buddha usually addresses the monks and nuns in his talks but his advice is valid in the same way for lay persons. These categories are also mentioned in the commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇi - the Atthāsalinī. The

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1 Thānissaro Bhikkhu 2005: 1.

2 Aṅguttara Nikāya; A 8.36.

3 Dīgha Nikāya ; D 33.3.38.

4 Itivuttaka; It 3.2.1.

5 Aṅguttara Nikāya 2008: 57.

Dhammasaṅgaṇi is one of the books of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. The Abhidhamma Piṭaka is the second part of the Tipiṭaka and also attributed to the Buddha Gotama. Here seven more “bases of meritorious action” are added. So we have a total of ten: *dasa puñña kiriya vatthu*. The additional seven are: “Making merit through polite and modest conduct; making merit through efforts to give practical help, offer service or do the common good; making merit through involving others in doing good deeds; making merit through rejoicing in the good deeds of others; making merit through listening to the teaching and acquiring knowledge that is free from harm; making merit through explaining the teaching and importing knowledge that is beneficial; making merit through correcting one's views, learning to see things as they really are so that one attains Right View.” (6) The mention of practical help (in this translation of the V. Payutto) shows that merit making is not an egoistic procedure. These seven bases of merit should be understood as included in the first three (7).

The Itivuttaka terms of “charity, virtue and cultivation” parallel the Aṅguttara Nikāya terms “giving, virtue and the development of meditation.” “Generosity, morality and mental training” are to be seen as another triad that is also frequently used in the same way. These expressions make it clear that meditation - in the way Buddha Gotama advises - should be understood as an ongoing mental practise, not a bodily exercise. The Puññakiriyavatthu Sutta outlines and covers all these three terms (8).

The three bases/grounds for making merits are popularly known in Myanmar with the Pāli words *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhāvanā*. *Sīla* and *bhāvanā* can be traced in the Eightfold Noble Path taught by the Buddha Gotama. *Sīla* - virtue/morality - comprises Right speech, Right action and Right livelihood. *Bhāvanā* - mental development/meditation - comprises Right effort, Right mindfulness, Right collectedness, Right aspiration and Right view. For lay persons morality/virtue means the observance of the five basic moral precepts. For Bhikkhus (monks) there are 227 Vinaya rules. There are various methods to practise mental development/meditation that are recommended by the Buddha. They are all enumerated in the Commentary “The Path of Purification” *Visuddhimagga* written by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa. The most popular traditions of Bhikkhu teachers of meditation in Myanmar are the traditions of Ledi Sayadaw, Moguk Sayadaw and Mahasi Sayadaw. Of the traditions founded by a lay teacher, the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin is best known.

Mahā Thera Ledi Sayadaw kept alive Buddha Dhamma during the time when the Christian missionaries were active in Burma after the English had invaded. He emphasized the fact that lay persons can and should practise the Buddha Dhamma through meditation like Saṅgha members do. He spoke of persons “of merit” that progress “to the level of *vipassanānañña*,” (9) naming thus persons that have the ability to understand the three marks of suffering or unsatisfactoriness, change and no-self (*Dukkha*, *Anicca* and *Anattā*).

To sum up: The acquisition of merit - *puññāni karoti* - can be practised by living virtuously and through practicing meditation as well as through generosity. In the Burmese language getting merits or making merits is expressed by *kutho ja deh* or *kutho*

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6 Payutto 2007: 62.

7 Atthasalini; Dhammasaṅgaṇi Commentary 1976: 212.

8 Aṅguttara Nikāya VIII, 36.

9 Mahā Thera Ledi Sayadaw 2006: 230. See also: Walton 2017: 177.

*lo dhe*. The amount of merit one can acquire through generosity (*dāna*) varies according to the purity of the receiver, starting with a Buddha followed by an Arahāt continuing down to persons without any virtues and finally to animals; we can find these explanations in the Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅga Sutta (10). *Dāna* in recent Myanmar research is encouraged as corporate social responsibility and observed through street food donations to the general public. (Häusler, N., 2017; Hirsch, C., 2017)

Although *dāna* is sequentially the first and most practically utilized activity of merit-making for the householder, *sīla* and *bhāvanā* are considered just as important - some say that they are more important. *Sīla* can be seen as the base for *bhāvanā*. Without *sīla* there can be no successful *bhāvanā*. To be skilled in merit one actually needs all three. If one has a strong desire to perform merits (*puññakāma*) one will accordingly get the results - *puñña vipāka*.

Now we will look into these results and possible underlying motivations.

### **The effects of *puñña* and *kusala***

*Puñña* - as opposed to *apuñña*/demeritorious - in Indian Hindu society before the Buddha Gotama was born merely referred to good *kamma* that bears fruit for worldly happiness or a good rebirth, but not to *Nibbāna*. The Buddha however uses *puñña* to include all wholesome actions that lead to *Nibbāna*, not only towards worldly happiness. The term *kusala* (wholesome, profitable, morally good or skilful) is used in the same way. Buddhists in Myanmar use in daily language the word *kutho* - derived from *kusala*. *Kamma* or *kan* (Burmese) or Karma (Sanskrit) is - as *kusala* and *akusala cetanā* - simply any action by thought, word or deed done deliberately. It is commonly (but wrongly) also used for the effects of these actions. The popular saying in Myanmar that past deeds *kan*, wisdom *nyan* and effort *virīya* are conditioning factors for the present life here and now can be classified in this context.

It should be also mentioned that the importance of gaining merits are highlighted in the Mettā Sutta (11) the Sutta of loving kindness - and also in the popular refuge in the Saṅgha as an incomparable field of merit to the world *puñña-khettaṃ lokassāti* (12). The Saṅgha is the monastic community of Bhikkhus (monks) and Bhikkhunis (nuns). As a separate category it refers also to those who have attained any of the stages of enlightenment, whether or not they are members of the monastic community, this is the Ariya Saṅgha.

In four other sources of the Sutta Piṭaka - Petavatthu, Vimānavatthu, Jātaka and Buddhavaṃsa - there are descriptions of how those who are reborn as *petas* (ghosts) can improve their fate through approving of the transfer of merits, how results of good deeds performed in human existence can lead to heavenly rebirth and how good deeds done by a Bodhisatta or some other spiritually developed person can inspire one's own effort to perform various deeds of merit.

A good example that illustrates the worldly effect of *puñña* concerning a good rebirth is the story of the hunter in Petavatthu (13). The hunter was active only during the daytime. He had been advised by a good friend about the possible consequences of his

10 Majjhima Nikāya III 142, see also Walton 2017: 153.

11 Itivuttaka; It 15-16.

12 Dīgha Nikāya; DN II 94

13 Petavatthu Pv.iii.7.

deeds for a future life after his passing away in this life. However he was not able to control himself all the time and refrained from killing only at night, not during the day. He was reborn as a ghost and had to suffer during the day a lot but felt happy at night. This illustrates how according to the Teaching of the Buddha the effects of *puñña* are inevitable as immoral deeds have inevitable results.

*Puñña* is mentioned in many central verses of the Dhammapada, which is one of the best known Buddhist texts. One verse says:

“If a person makes merit (*puññañ*)  
He should do it again & again,  
Should develop a penchant for it;  
To accumulate merit (*puññañassa*) brings ease.” (14)

### **The motivation to perform *puñña***

According to the teaching of the Buddha there are 31 planes of existence. The performance of *puñña* generates positive *kamma/kan/karma* and thus the preconditions to gain a favourable rebirth are strengthened - it may be in the human plane, it may be in the Deva or in the Brahmā plane. In the Samaññaphala Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya a high status in the human world is described as a direct result of *puñña* in past lives. These results are called worldly results - *lokiya puññānam vipāko*.

At any time there is also the option to share one's merits *pattidāna* (15) with all other beings.

Through the accumulation of merits one has a greater possibility to meet the next Buddha, Buddha Metteyya. According to the Therāvada tradition four Buddhas have appeared so far in this world cycle. The Buddha Gotama was the last one of these four. Before this world will come to an end only one more Buddha will appear - this is the Buddha Metteyya. In the Cakkāvatti Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya the prophecy of the arrival of the Buddha Metteyya is given in great detail.

The motivation to perform *puñña* at times might simply be an urgent need for some charity at any given moment. Maybe there is the need to offer food to a hungry person or even to offer a kidney to a sick person. In the Abhidamma Piṭaka these kinds of deeds are described as accompanied by moral or skilful consciousness *kusala citta*, especially if the action is not prompted by somebody else. This shows that the acquisition of merit is not something that is exclusively for Buddhists.

Finally there are the perfections (*pāramī*) that one has to fulfil in order to gain *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* is the aim of the Noble Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha. Myanmar lay persons may utter the sentence “*Idam me puññam, nibbānassa paccayo hotu*” (By this merit of mine, may it bring about the realization of *Nibbāna*). This is a supermundane, non-worldly (*lokuttara*) result. It is obvious that only a person who takes refuge in the Buddha Dhamma can perform merits in order to attain *Nibbāna*. Some kind of reciprocity and “pay-back” can always be expected. *Nibbāna* finally is unconditioned and beyond the law of cause and effect - *kamma/kan*.

14 Thānissaro Bhikkhu (1997) 54: verse 118

15 Aṅguttara Nikāya VII.53 Nandamātā Sutta

Not everybody wants or is able to meditate in Myanmar. Even if one wants to and is able to meditate it might be that this is not the case in all phases of life. Many people in Myanmar just perform *dāna* and *sīla*. The reason can be lack of effort, lack of motivation, extreme weather conditions, lack of food (16), a very noisy surrounding, a mental or bodily disease, results of past thoughts, words or deeds (*vipāka kamma*) or simply one's perfections *pāramī* being at a certain level.

It should be noted that the practise of virtue (*sīla*) is of different quality depending on the motivation of the person. It is of low quality if virtue is observed in order to become famous; it is of medium quality if virtue is kept to attain favourable rebirth; and it is of high quality if the aim is *Nibbāna* (17).

Only the Buddhas and the Arahats are beyond *puñña*. The highest *puñña* is performed by a Bodhisatta, a Buddha to be.

### Western appreciation

As early as 1970 Roy Amore wrote an excellent PhD thesis about "The Concept and Practise of Doing Merit in Early Theravāda Buddhism." (18) He states that merit is the heart of the Buddhist ethics for lay persons. However he also draws attention to a discussion that we already mentioned, namely that the aim to go beyond the accumulation of merits has to be there, because merits alone are still in the field of the cycle of life (*saṃsāra*) and can prolong this cycle.

In the Abhidhamma Piṭaka the different states of consciousness (*citta*) and the mental factors (*cetasika*) are described. Roy Amore puts into focus that in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka the term *kusala* is always used, not *puñña*. This is the same when the famous Paṭṭhāna is recited in Myanmar - and it is the most popular recitation there. In the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, where the Paṭṭhāna can be found, the effects of merits are analysed. (19) It is not a manual to show different approaches of practical application. So it seems that ultimate realities are more associated with *kusala* and practical steps more with *puñña*. There is one Sutta where the Buddha himself combined *puñña* and *kusala* in one sentence (20).

This discussion about the difference or similarity of *puñña* and *kusala* is continued on a very high and academic level by and Pāli Scholars till now. The famous German scholar Nyānatiloka Mahāthera, who ordained as a Bhikkhu in Burma as early as in 1904, notices an overlapping of the terms (see for this the German translations of the Milindapañhā and the Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha). Damien Keowns book "The Nature of Buddhist Ethics" in 1992 started a discussion of more than two decades. The latest contribution I could find is from Stephan Evans published in 2012. Evans calls it a misunderstanding "...that *puñña* refers to actions that are motivated by craving." (21) He

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16 Even for the moral precepts there is the saying that: "Only when your stomach is full can you keep the precepts."

17 Evans 2012: 532.

18 Amore 1970.

19 Kyaw 2014: 132. Shwe-sin Tipiṭaka Sayadaw Ven. Dr. Gandhamālālaikāra: "Through the veneration of the Paṭṭhāna one will gain enormous amount of merit and will be protected by the gods and brahmas."

20 Digha Nikaya: Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta.

21 Evans 2012: 538.

says that “.....nowhere in text or commentary, as far as I am aware, does *puñña* refer specifically to actions motivated for pleasant results.” (22) So it seems to me that his research rules out any misuse of merit-making if it is practised in the way it was taught by the Buddha Gotama himself - namely with the realization of *Nibbāna* as the aim.

In my text I am not exploring the day to day reality and practise of *puñña* and *kusala* in Myanmar. I refer to Matthew J. Walton, who recently wrote an excellent recent study of the subject. Walton shows how the daily behaviour can often be traced back to the original Pāli categories - or rather their corresponding terms in Myanmar language. He observes that Buddhist in Myanmar tend to think about political action as essentially moral practise. In the year 2003 E. B. Findly came to a similar conclusion exploring *dāna* in Pāli Buddhism. He suggested that the early Buddhist teaching on merit has in addition to its religious importance an important social function as well. In Vol. II of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Chapter VII - “Deeds of Merits” - social functions such as making others happy are mentioned.

### ***Puñña* for laypersons**

It is also interesting to know that making a distinction between lay persons and Bhikkhus/Bhikkhunīs concerning the effect on one's own purification process - whether you call it *kusala* or *puñña* - is not necessary because both groups can reach *Nibbāna* - this is shown in the *Bāhiya Sutta*. (23) The difference after the attainment of the last stage of purification (Arahatship) has been attained, however, is that a lay person can continue to live on only for a very short time - this is in case she/he has no opportunity to ordain (24). The reason is that this high purity can only be maintained as a Bhikkhu/Bhikkhunī. This was the case of the father of the Buddha Gotama - King Suddhodana - who attained Arahatship when he was a lay person. His story is found in the *Therīgāthā Aṭṭakathā* (25).

A good example for practical exercise concerning merits is the *Mahā Maṅgala Sutta*, which is often recited in Myanmar as a protection against dangers, *paritta*. Thirty eight high blessings including *Nibbāna* are enumerated. I will pick out some that may be of interest: “To dwell in a suitable locality [...] to have done meritorious deeds in the past [...] to have wide general knowledge [...] speaking what is true, non backbiting [...] to attend closely to one's parents [...] to take care of one's wife and children [...] making charity [...] to support one's paternal and maternal relatives [...] to abstain from any intoxicating drink or drug such as alcohol [...] to realize *Nibbāna*.” (26) The Venerable Thānissaro Bhikkhu has written an excellent summary of different Suttas, that explain how one can gain merits through the practise of *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhāvanā* (27).

It is an option for everybody to write down one's merits that have been gained so far in order to remember them at the point of death, which is considered a very important moment. In olden days the kings of Burma used to do that and always had a “meritbook”

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22 Evans 2012: 530.

23 Udāna 1.10.

24 *Milindapanhā* III, 19.

25 *Therīgāthā A.* (ThigA.141).

26 Ministry of Religious Affairs Myanmar 1997: 263.

27 Thānissaro Bhikkhu 2005.

at hand - *puñña potthaka*. The moment of death determines in Theravāda Buddhism the next birth; there is no intermediate state.

### Is misuse possible?

I have explained in a different text of mine (28) some time ago that it is possible to combine social and political aims with the earning of merits. The more recent research of Walton observes that “making merit provides the basic structures of Burmese Buddhists’ daily practice” (29) at the individual level and notices the belief (of many Burmese Buddhists) that “effects (of correct moral action) can be aggregated at the group level, with the collective deeds of a nation or a group of people influencing that nation or group’s development or progress.” (30)

But here a very subtle and sometimes difficult aspect flows in. The practise of earning merits when combined with a wrong intention (*micca cetanā*) can be misused easily. “It is enshrined in the Pāli canon that only by giving and performing ethical actions with a mind based in *Mettā* can the benefits of the activities - namely, the generation of merit - be acquired.” (31)

In the year 1934 George Orwell (32) described in his book “Burmese Days” the manipulation of earning merits as a sort of compensation for ones own wrong deeds done to others in society, up to the assumption that criminal acts can be counteracted in this way. Maybe because of this well known book some scholars even assume that it is a general habit of the people in Myanmar to compensate an ethical violation with new merits (33). This would be a gross misunderstanding of the teachings of the Buddha. However, this is a taboo topic. “Indeed, most Burmese would consider it a sacrilege to question the moral intentions of those who publicly demonstrate service to the Buddha.” (34).

In the Buddhist literature pride and arrogance are described as soldiers of *Māra* (35). This is - of course - irrespective of place and time.

Buddhists in Myanmar consider themselves very fortunate to be able to practise *puñña* in the same way that Tipiṭaka books, the Bhikkhu Saṅgha and the Ariya Saṅgha advise them to.

The very practical effects concerning *puñña/kusala* as charity/giving/generosity in modern Myanmar are very obvious. The CAF World Giving Index 2016 as the world’s leading study of global generosity places Myanmar on place 1 out of 140 countries for the third year in a row. “The CAF team noted Myanmar's continuous positive results in

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28 Bruhn 2014. Walton (2017) gives a detailed description of the connection between *kusala* and political thought.

29 Walton 2017: 48.

30 Walton 2017: 63.

31 Fuller 2015:1.

32 Orwell, Georg 1934.

33 Zöllner 2014: 83. According to Zöllner in the Myanmar tradition only Bhikkhus can attain Nibbāna. Laypersons and female persons cannot do so. The exact opposite is true. See: footnote 24 and 26.

34 Schober, 1996: 203.

35 Sayagyi U Chit Tin 1997: 269.

its survey and says they could be linked to its population's cultural and religious beliefs. A large number of people in Myanmar are practicing Buddhists who follow the Therāvada branch, where small, frequent acts of giving are the norm.”

### Discussion

We have tried to explain merit and its content using the original sources of the Pāli scriptures. There are indications that cultural factors are relevant - factors like social acceptance or merely following a traditional set-up. I suggest that the findings in my paper here and in the CAF Index can be used as the basis for further research to find out whether the daily behaviour in modern Myanmar is congruent with the original Pāli sources. Is there a generation gap? Is there a clearly discernible difference between the practise in the towns and cities and the practise in the countryside? Is the level of education relevant? A case study with a questionnaire will have to clarify these open questions.

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