

Lesson 26 - MERIT

Opening chants, meditation and review of last lesson.

Question to think about before the story: Why is it important to make more merit ?

Story: Visakha

Visakha was the daughter of a millionaire. Her grandfather heard that the Buddha was arriving in their city, and he told his grand-daughter Visakha to bring all of her friends and servants to welcome the Buddha. Although she was a young girl, when she heard the Buddha teach the Dharma, she fully understood and became a suttapanna, the first level of enlightenment. When she was 15 or 16 years old, she was extremely beautiful and got married to Punnavaddhana, the son of the millionaire Migara. Her husband and his family were not followers of the Buddha but followed other religious teachers. Visakha was taught all the proper manners of being a good wife, like respecting her husband's parents and offering them food first.

Visakha was very kind and devoted to the Buddha and Dharma. Migara did not like her devotion to the Buddha; he preferred his own religious teachers. One morning, he was sitting in his fancy chair eating his rice-porridge, and Visakha was fanning him. A bhikkshu came to the door to receive food. Visakha moved out of the way so Migara could see the monk, but Migara pretended not to notice him. Migara kept his face down, enjoying his porridge. Visakha felt disgusted with his behavior. She thought, "How could he just ignore a monk at the door?" She wondered what to do. If she also ignored the monk, or turned him away, that would be rude and disrespectful to a monk, which she did not want to do. If she served food to the monk, that would be disrespectful to Migara, her father-in-law, and would be disobeying his rules. So she said to the bhikkshu, "Bhante, you may go away. My father-in-law is eating stale food." Migara looked at her in anger and disbelief, thinking, "She has disgraced the family!"

Migara ordered the servants: "Take away the food. Chase that girl out of the house. She says I am eating garbage." But all of the servants respected and admired Visakha very much, so they did not dare move or do anything against her. Visakha politely said, "Dear father, there is no good reason why I should go away. Eight people from my clan were sent with me to stay here at your house to report any misbehavior of mine. Please call them and have them investigate whether I am guilty of misbehavior."

Migara called the eight people from Visakha's clan, and described what happened, saying "While I was eating my porridge, this girl said what I was eating was unclean. She has misbehaved and should be asked to leave." Then Visakha explained, "Sirs, when my father-in-law ignored the bhikkshu at the door and kept eating, he was not getting merit in this life. He was enjoying the merit of past lives, which is what made him wealthy in this life. Enjoying old merits from

past lives without making fresh new merits is like eating old stale food. So I told the monk to go away, and that he was eating stale food.” The eight men from her clan agreed that she was innocent and had not misbehaved. Migara then agreed that she was not guilty of being rude.

Migara tried to find fault with her for other incidences, too, but no one else would find that she misbehaved. She planned to leave his house anyway, as he first had asked her to do. But Migara’s attitude toward her changed, and he asked her to forgive him. She said., “Dear father, I pardon you, but I will only stay if I can serve the monks as I like, since my family and I have complete faith in the Buddha.” Migara agreed, and after some time, he invited the Buddha to his home and became a great follower of the Buddha also.

Visakha was not only devoted to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, but she was extremely generous. She thought about what they might need, saw what was needed, and gave generously. She spent a large amount of money to buy land and build a monastery with 500 rooms, called the Pubbarama Monastery, for the Buddha and Sangha. She asked the Buddha to allow her to make eight offerings: bathing clothes for monks, bathing robes for nuns, meals for visiting bhikkshus, meals for resident bhikkshus, food for sick bhikkshus, food for monks attending sick monks, medicine, and gruel (porridge) which is healthy food for the bhikkshus. She helped the nuns in many ways, also. When she thought about bhikkshus using her gifts and becoming Arahants, she felt enormously happy and peaceful and could then concentrate her mind well in meditation.

Questions after the story:

1. Why did Migara not like Visakha’s devotion to the Buddha?
2. Why didn’t Migara welcome and give food to the bhikkshu?
3. Why didn’t Visakha serve food to the monk?
4. What did Visakha say to the bhikkshu?
5. What did Visakha mean when she said Migara is eating stale food?
6. What happened to Migara?
7. What kind of person was Visakha?

Quotation of Buddha about the moral of the story:

“Puññaṃ ce puriso kayirā, kayirāth’ etaṃ punappunaṃ, tamhi chandaṃ kayirātha, sukho puññassa uccayo.”

“If one does good deeds, then do it again and again; take delight in merit, for accumulation of merit leads to happiness.”

Dhammapada 118 (9:3)

“Pāpo’ pi passati bhadram, yāva pāpaṃ na paccati, yadā ca paccati pāpaṃ, atha pāpo pāpāni passati.”

“As long as the evil act does not ripen, the evil-doer feels fine, but when the evil act ripens then he feels the painful result of his evil deed.”

Dhammapada 119 (9:4)

Application of the moral(s) in the story to our daily lives:

Each of us is fortunate to have a healthy body, an intelligent mind, a nice family, good teachers, and to be able to learn and practice Dharma. Does everyone have such good fortune? No. Some people don't have all of these things. Many people are suffering with illness, poverty, worry, unhappiness, bad environment, problems in the family, abuse, conflicts or even war. Also, there are many beings suffering in hell-worlds. Why do we have such good fortune? We have done many good deeds in the past, and we had good virtues and lived with good morals in past lives. That is called "good karmas" or "punyakarma" which causes good results (vīpaka) - health, wealth, success and happiness. Does that mean we will always have good fortune?

No. As the Buddha says, everything is impermanent, including good fortune. Everything changes, and nothing lasts forever. We don't know what we have done in our many past lives, so we don't know what will happen in this life. Most people do a lot of things to enjoy themselves, without thinking much about what they can do for others. They do some good deeds, many not-so-good deeds, and some bad deeds. We may have lived many lives like that in the past. Now we are getting the results of our good deeds. We don't know when the results of those good deeds will run out, or when we will get the results of our not-so-good and bad deeds, our "bad karmas."

What happens if we run out of results of our good deeds? Then we only have results of bad karmas to experience. Just like a car runs out of gas when we use up the gas in the tank and don't refill it, we run out of good fortune when we use up our good karmas and don't refill with more good karmas. And then when we run out, we experience suffering. When we are suffering, it may be difficult to start doing good deeds. It is difficult to do them when we are sick, poor, depressed, injured, or having other big problems. Visakha pointed out that Migara was wealthy because of his merits, good karmas, the good deeds done in past lives, so he was enjoying the results of those. But he does not know when those results will end or when the results of his past bad deeds will start taking effect. He was like a crab in a pot of water. He is happy and dancing around in the cool water in the pot, thinking that everything is great. But when the fire is turned on under the pot, the poor crab suffers and gets cooked. When Migara's bad karmas take effect, he will suffer like the crab getting cooked.

We too may have done some foolish bad deeds in past lives and maybe in this life. What do we mean by "bad deeds" or "pāpakarma"? Being unkind and selfish, hurting others with our words or deeds, fighting, being greedy and not generous, taking things from others and not returning them, lying, and misbehaving in many types of ways. We may not have been punished for our bad deeds and may not have experienced anything horrible afterward, so we may have thought we could do some more wrongdoing and nothing bad would happen. Like the Buddha says, as long as an evil deed has not "ripened" (caused a bad result), we may think it is OK to do, and enjoy doing it again, thinking it is fun or daring, because nothing goes wrong for us. So we may have been dancing like a crab in a

pot, too. But, like the Buddha says, when the evil deed ripens, maybe a long time or many lives later, we will experience the suffering (dukkha) from it.

What can we do about that? Do we have to live our lives afraid of bad things that might happen because of our past deeds? No! As we learned before, everyone goes through difficulties and experiences dukkha (suffering). That is part of life. But we can also decrease the dukkha (suffering) that we must experience from our past deeds, and we can avoid having more bad events happen in our future.

How do we avoid having more bad events happen in the future? We stop doing wrong deeds (pāpakarmas) and do more good deeds (punyakarmas), by following dharma. Like Anathapindika and Visakha, we give what we can, and help others, which is punyakarma, good deeds. And, we follow Dharma by being honest, kind, compassionate, humble, tolerant, peaceful, self-controlled, and practicing the other morals we have learned about. That way, we have the results of the good deeds (vīpaka) in our future, and, as the Buddha says, the good deeds lead to happiness.

How can we decrease the dukkha we must experience from our past bad karmas? What if we must experience illness, injury, loss, problems, abuse, conflicts, and failures? Like Ven. Angulimala, we can have confidence that we are now good people practicing Dharma. He became a great monk and therefore avoided going to hell-worlds for his misbehavior, but he had to experience the abuse from people who still hated him. So, his suffering was greatly decreased. Like Ven. Sona Kolivisa, we can meditate, which itself will give us happiness, and which will enable us to calmly handle difficulties with wisdom.

Activity to reinforce the lesson: Draw the Crab in the Pot: Each student writes today's quotation of Buddha on paper and draws a picture of a crab in a pot of water with a fire lit under it. Watercolor paints may be used to color the picture.

Closing chant: Sabbe satā bhavantu sukhitattā
May all beings have happy minds!