

**Question: Isn't it selfish to try to get merit, like going to the temple and doing good deeds, so you can have a better life? Isn't it better to help people because you actually care about them rather than from the desire to get merit? *From Omar***

Answer: All humans are in some way seeking a better life – more pleasure and less pain. We seek pleasure in bonding with others – in friendship, romance, having children – and in acquiring possessions – getting a nice house, car, clothes, etc. This leads us to have attachments to other people and gives us the pleasure of being entertained, admired and respected. And it leads us to work hard to acquire possessions, and to give things to those people we care about (to whom we have attachments), in the hope that our kindness is reciprocated. Going to the temple and doing good deeds gives us confidence that we will get a better future, with our wishes fulfilled, and at least to be healthy, comfortable, or to go to heaven when we die, for example. All of these are essentially selfish – feelings of “me” and “mine,” what I want, self-centeredness.

Because we have bodies that need food and a warm safe place to live, and we need help from other people to get them, we all have selfish desires that we need just to survive. However, when we let our desires grow way beyond the basic needs, eventually (over many lives) we find that satisfying the desires does not give us full satisfaction. Lots of money, lots of love, lots of family, lots of education, lots of entertainment, lots of fame – over time just becomes disillusionment, lack of peace of mind. So then we seek peace of mind, and we find meditation.

When we first enjoy the benefits of meditation, it feels good – it is a pleasure that can also be rather selfish. Meditation can cause increased sensitivity to negativity in our environment– such as chaos, anger, and coarse behavior -- which makes us avoid those kinds of people and places, and seek harmony and peaceful places. These are desires and aversions, feelings of what I want and what I don't want.

But meditation also results in understanding pain – we are more and more mindful of our own discomforts and stresses, and by mindfully observing them, we are less affected by them. More mindful of our own pain, we become more aware of the discomforts and stresses of others. As we become more sensitive to others' feelings, and to the many levels and types of discomfort that humans feel, we become more compassionate to other people. And, we develop more understanding of how we are all alike; while our differences are based on countless conditions in time and space, we, just like all others, have had to learn innumerable lessons slowly, the hard way (bad karma, bad result) over many lives. Meditation and the increased sensitivity that comes with it also result in understanding the interdependency of all beings. We realize that our thinking is shaped by the people we encounter, so we are all creatures of, or conditioned by, the words and actions of others around us. We become grateful to all of them for all the lessons we learned, pleasant and painful. With the increased understanding, compassion and gratitude we feel toward other people, we naturally want to help them, ease their discomfort, and in some way to transmit dharma to them if possible, so they can feel the peace of practicing dharma. Then there is no selfish thought of reciprocation, reward or merit earned from doing good deeds.

So while trying to get merit can at first seem rather selfish, after some time practicing dharma and meditation, our feelings of “I” and “mine” decrease, and worldly pleasures are not so pleasurable anymore. We develop more feelings of “we” and desire for universal harmony, so

we naturally sacrifice more of our own pleasure for the well-being of others. So, our selfishness decreases, and ultimately we become selfless.