

Lesson 26 – MERIT – Visakha and Migara

Visakha was the daughter of a very wealthy man. When she was a very young girl, seven years old, her grandfather heard that the Buddha was arriving in their city and encouraged Visakha to bring all of her friends and servants and join him in welcoming the Buddha. When they went to welcome him, they took a seat among the crowd of people and heard him teach the Dharma. Little Visakha was not an ordinary girl; at her young age, she understood what he was teaching and experienced the bliss and wisdom of the first level of enlightenment, which means that she was on the path to full enlightenment and would reach it in her lifetime or in no more than seven lifetimes as a human or in a heaven-world. Her grandfather felt so happy and fortunate that the Buddha and his monks were in their hometown that he invited them to eat a meal at his house every day for the next two weeks.

When Visakha was sixteen years old, she was married to the son of a very wealthy man named Migara. Visakha moved in to the home of her husband and his family. She was very kind, had excellent manners and respected her husband's parents, always offering them food first, before others were served.

She also was very devoted to the Buddha. Migara didn't like that at all. He and his family were not at all interested in the Buddha and preferred other religious teachers instead. Visakha's devotion to the Buddha annoyed him so much that he thought of breaking up the marriage between Visakha and his son.

One morning, he was sitting at the table eating his rice-porridge, and Visakha was fanning him with a bamboo fan to keep him cool on that hot morning. A Buddhist monk came to the entrance of the house, holding his bowl to receive food. Visakha moved out of the way so Migara could see the monk and offer him some porridge.

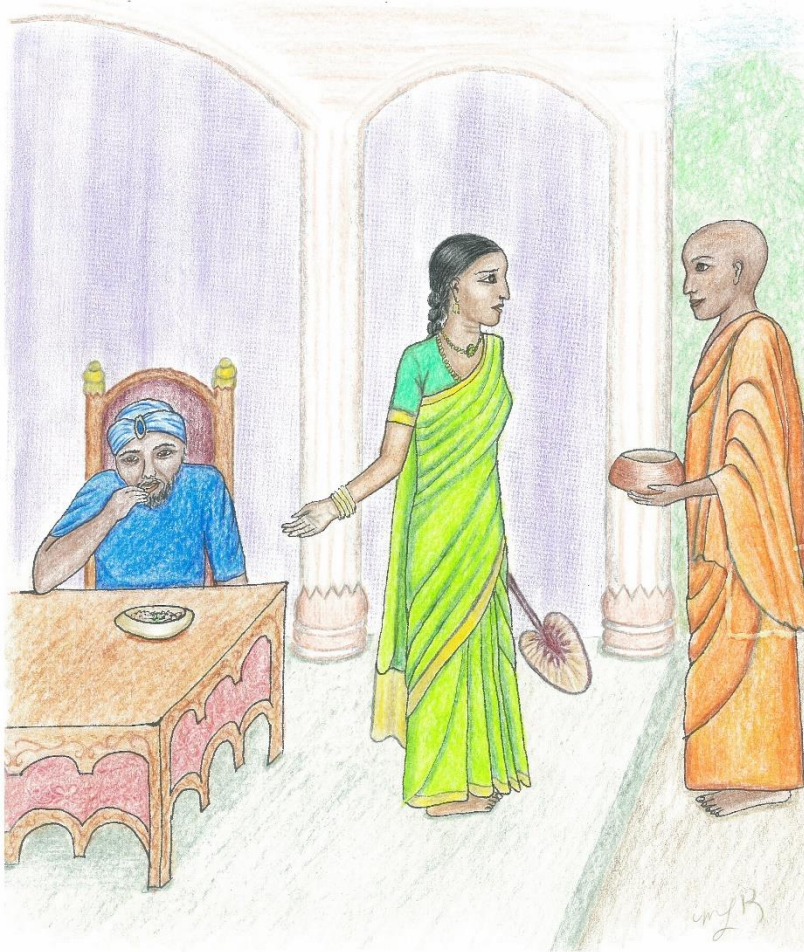
Migara, however, didn't have any respect for Buddhist monks and didn't want to offer him anything. He wanted the monk to leave, so he pretended not to notice him. Migara kept his head down and continued to eat slowly, as if he was totally focused on enjoying his porridge.

Visakha felt shocked and disgusted with his behavior. She thought, "How could he just ignore a monk who needs food? We have plenty of food we can offer." She knew that if she asked Migara for permission to serve food to the monk, he would be upset and definitely not allow it.

She felt torn between disrespecting the monk by not offering food and disrespecting her father-in-law by offering food to the monk anyway. Having great devotion to the Buddha, she felt a strong urge to serve food to the monk no matter what. To ignore the monk or turn him away would be rude and disrespectful to a student of the Buddha! That would be terrible!

But taking food from Migara's house and serving it to the monk without Migara's permission would be like stealing from Migara, her father-in-law. Not only would it be wrong to offer stolen food, but surely Migara would be angry and try to destroy her marriage to his son. That also would be terrible!

What a dilemma! Both choices were unthinkable. She had to do something else. What should she do?



She said to the monk, "Venerable Sir, 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 people from Visakha's clan, and described what happened.

He said to them, "While I was eating my porridge, this girl said that what I was eating was unclean. She has misbehaved and she should be asked to leave."

Then Visakha explained to them, “Sirs, when my father-in-law ignored the monk at the door and kept eating, he was not making merit in this life. He was enjoying only the merit of past lives, which is what made him wealthy in this life. Enjoying result of 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 my father-in-law was eating stale food.”

Visakha was explaining that Migara was wealthy because he made a lot of merit. That means he must have been generous, helped others, and done other virtuous acts, or good karmas, that gave him the good result of being wealthy in this life. But, she observed, he wasn't making much merit in this life. Therefore, he was enjoying only the results of old merits from way back in time, and therefore they were old and stale, not fresh and new.

The eight men from her clan agreed that she was innocent and had not lied or insulted him. Migara then agreed that she was not guilty of wrongdoing.

Migara still was annoyed with her, and tried to find fault with her for other incidences. No one else, however, would find that she had misbehaved. Because she wanted to respect his wishes, and he wished her to leave, she planned to leave his house anyway. But after some time, Migara's attitude toward her changed, and he asked her to forgive him.

She said, “Father, I forgive 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. From that time on, he became a great follower of the Buddha also. He regretted his earlier rejection of the Buddha and his monks. Now he could see the good character of Visakha. He was deeply grateful to her for having led him to the path to enlightenment through the Buddha Dharma. Not only Migara, but everyone in the household - his whole family and all their employees and servants- also became devoted to the Buddha.

Visakha soon became famous for her great generosity to the Buddha and Sangha. She thought about what they might need, saw what was needed, and bought it for them. She spent a large amount of money to buy land and build a monastery with 500 rooms for the Buddha and his monks. That became one of the two monasteries that the Buddha stayed in most frequently.

She also made donations of robes and medicine for monks and for Buddhist female monastics, or nuns. She made sure they were well cared for, donating food for monks living at or visiting the monastery, sick monks, and the monks taking care of sick monks. She helped the nuns in many ways, also. When she thought about them making use of her gifts, she felt enormously happy and peaceful. The merit she had made, as well as the joy she felt from making the donations, enabled her to calm and concentrate her mind very well in meditation.

Questions:

1. How did Migara feel about Visakha's devotion to the Buddha? (it annoyed him, he didn't like it at all)
2. What did Migara do when the monk arrived? (he ignored the monk, pretended he didn't see the monk, kept his head down as if focused on enjoying his food)
3. Why didn't Visakha serve food to the monk? (if she asked permission, Migara would not allow it, and if she served food anyway, it would be like stealing from Migara and he would be angry and ruin her marriage)
4. What did Visakha mean when she said Migara is eating stale food? (he is enjoying the results of his past merit and not making any new merit)
5. What kind of person was Visakha? (generous, respectful, kind, devoted to the Buddha)
6. After her generosity to the Sangha, and after feeling the joy of making the donations, what was Visakha better able to do? (meditate; concentrate her mind in meditation)

What the Buddha said:

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

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

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

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 118 (9:3), 119 (9:4)

Dharma discussion - Merit:

What is “merit”?

Merit means good karma, the cause of good results, the cause of being fortunate.

Merit includes good deeds. What are some examples of good deeds in the story?

Offering food, making donations, generosity, honoring parents.

Merit also includes Buddhist practices.

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

Merit also includes being virtuous, acting with good character. What are some examples of virtuous behavior? Kindness, compassion, patience, tolerance, honesty, forgiving others, admitting our mistakes, being considerate. Actually, merit includes anything we say or do with love, with a good heart.

Merit is the cause of being fortunate. What are some examples of being fortunate, or being lucky?

Having wealth, good health, intelligence, loving family, nice friends, good home, good neighborhood, good teachers, happy experiences, success.

These happen as a result of making merit, acting or speaking with love, with a good heart.

Are we enjoying the merits of past lives? Yes!

Does that mean we always will have good fortune? No.

As the Buddha says, everything is impermanent, everything changes.

And everyone, even the Buddha, has made mistakes, bad karmas, in past lives, so we all experience some suffering sometimes— illness, injuries, loss, difficulties.

Even very virtuous, kind people suffer badly sometimes because they are experiencing the results of old negative karmas.

But we shouldn't worry about that. It's best to focus on the present, not the past. You are now creating many new merits, so you are making a good future for yourself, and the difficult times won't seem so bad.

When we make new merits, we develop good habits, and then it's easier to keep doing them in the future.

What happens when people don't believe in merits and karma?

Migara was acting as if he didn't believe in karma. He didn't know that he was just enjoying the results of his good deeds done in past lives, so he thought he didn't have to do much to create a good life for himself.

He didn't seem concerned about being rude to the monk and negative karma.

Similarly, people who behave selfishly and do bad deeds – for example, being unkind, harming others, taking things from others without returning them, lying, bullying – often don't suffer punishment or consequences, so they think they can get away with it. Everything seems to be going just fine for them.

They think that nothing bad will happen.

But eventually, in one life or another, they'll experience results of their behavior.

They are 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 crab suffers and gets cooked.

Or they are like a person who has saved up money in the bank, but who spends it all and doesn't earn any more money to deposit in the bank, and ends up being very poor.

Making merit is like earning money and saving it in a bank; we have a wealth of good karma. The more merit we make, the more we are creating a good future.

But unlike money, merits stay with us, even after we die, from one life to another.
We can also share our merits, or offer them to others.
We can share merits with 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, to help all beings wherever they are.

If we give our merits to others, then do we lose them?
It seems logical that if we give everything away, we have nothing left for ourselves.
But actually, sharing merits, being generous and compassionate, gives us even more merit!

Activities:

1. Draw the Crab in the Pot:

Write on paper the Buddha's words:

“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.”

Then, draw a picture of a crab in a pot of water with a fire lit under it. Watercolor paint, markers, pastels or crayons may be used to color the picture.

The picture of the crab in the pot reminds us that when a crab is in a pot of cool water, he feels like everything is just fine, but once the stove is turned on – once he feels the results of bad karma - he is shocked to feel the pain of the hot water.

2. Make a list of today's merits:

Make a list of each thing you did today with kindness and love, caring about others. Include any instances where you almost did something uncaring, unkind, or dishonest but you decided to be kind or honest instead. Include any prayers, chanting, or meditation that you did. Also include anything you did while being mindful.