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The cultivation method of accumulating merits of virtues without attachment cited in *The Diamond Sutra*

Can Huang

Introduction

Ever since the ancient time, people have mixed up the good fortune with the merits of virtues easily. For instance, temples often times set a ‘donation box’ labeled as ‘box of merits’. Moreover, people often times name the major donors to the Dharma assembly of the temples as the ‘masters of merits’. All these practices mislead people, especially the beginners of learning Buddhism, to believe good fortunes are equivalent to the merits of virtues. The famous case study on the dialogue between the Dharma Master Damou, and Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty is also a typical example of such misconception.

This essay is focused on exploring the cultivation method of accumulating the merits of virtues without attachment cited in *The Diamond Sutra* and elaborating why the cultivation without attachment generates the true merit of virtues. This essay will also cites the example of Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty to illustrate that the Emperor’s generous offerings and donations in the temples only generated good fortunes for him instead of the true merits of virtues. The reason being is that the Emperor Wu was deeply attached to the idea of giving donations. With such persistent attachment to the concept of Buddhism, the Emperor Wu ended up with inducing misfortunes to the country. This essay is intended to alert people to do good things without attachment to the idea of such good deeds. Only with such mentality, one would generate the true merits. Only through such method of cultivation, one can attain

both merits and wisdom to benefit all beings and to reach the complete enlightenment of Buddhahood together with all beings.

I . The method of cultivating merits without attachment – almsgiving without dwelling on the idea of giving

A Bodhisattva's mind should not abide anywhere when giving alms; that is to say, he should give without a mind abiding in form, or he should give without a mind abiding in sound, or in smell, or in taste, or in touch or in things. Subhuti, thus a Bodhisattva should give alms without a mind abiding in false notions of form(laksana).Why? (Because) if a Bodhisattva's mind does not abide in forms(laksanas) when practicing charity(dana), his merit will be inconceivable and immeasurable.¹

The interpretation of this text can be summarized in three aspects:

Firstly, giving is the basic requirement to cultivate merits. In the narrow definition of ‘giving’, one can offer giving of wealth², the giving of wisdom³, the giving of fearlessness⁴. Despite these are three different ways of giving, they all manifest the kindness of wanting to benefit other people. In the broad sense of giving, it may encompass all deeds that are beneficial to others. Essentially, giving may encompass Six Deliveries and Six Deliveries may entail myriad practices of giving. Almsgiving is one of the Six Deliveries and it

¹ Kumarajiva. Trans.鳩摩羅什, *The Diamond Sutra*, 《金剛般若波羅蜜經》, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*, 《大正新修大藏經》第8冊, No.0235, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0235_001> [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <http://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_24_7318.html> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

² The giving of wealth can be divided into two categories: external and internal wealth. Giving food, medicine, property to help beings is the cultivation of external wealth. Volunteering one's intelligence, body or time to help beings is the cultivation of giving internal wealth.

³ In a narrow definition, the giving of wisdom means presenting the Buddha-dharma to all beings, transforming the deluded to awakened. In a broad definition, sharing the knowledge, techniques, skills, etc to people, as long as people benefit from it, is the practice of giving of wisdom.

⁴ Saving people away from kinds of horror and helping them no longer fear is the practice of giving of fearlessness.

encompasses the remaining Five Deliveries, namely, Precepts 持戒, Patience 忍辱, Diligence 精進, Meditative Concentration 禪定 and Wisdom 般若. Practicing precepts and cultivating patience are considered giving of fearlessness; practicing diligence and meditative concentration are reflections of giving of wisdom. If one can practice Six Deliveries in his daily life, he is considered the Bodhisattvas giving myriad benefits to all beings.

‘Giving’ also means ‘giving up one’s belongings to benefit others’. In light of ‘six dusts’ (form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and idea) that we with every day, if one can give up on his attachments to the four dusts (form, smell, taste, and touch), for instance, by giving away one’s wealth, medicine, food and clothes and so on to benefit others, one is cultivating the merits of alms giving. Through such giving away one’s resources to support other beings, one is able to free the recipients from fears of losing their lives. Such giving away of one’s attachment to ‘four dusts’ is considered giving of fearlessness. Furthermore, if one is able to give away his attachment to ‘sound dust’, one is considered giving wisdom to benefit others. If one is able to give up his attachment to idea, one is considered giving all three types of almsgiving to others, namely, almsgiving, giving of fearlessness and giving of wisdom.¹ The key of giving is the mindset that one is willing to give away himself to benefit others. When one indeed has such mindset of giving, everything that one does in his daily life is gaining him the access to accumulating the true merits of giving.

Secondly, the mind not abiding anywhere is the key principle. Without a mind of abiding anything means non-attachment to all phenomena and all things within or beyond the world. That is to say, there are no attachment and differentiation in one’s mind. The Buddha took Six

¹ Shi,Yuan Ying 釋圓瑛, *The Annotation on the Diamond Sutra* 《金剛般若波羅蜜經講義》, <<http://books.foz.cn/books2/1227.htm>> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

Dusts as an example to explain not to abide anything in details. ‘Six dusts’ (form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and idea) are the objects of six sense (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind). If one attached the Six Dusts and put these phenomena into mind, the afflictions would arise. Those afflictions would obstruct our inherent wisdom and virtuous capabilities as a Buddha. Therefore, one should neither attach to six dusts when giving nor abide the false notions of forms, namely, the notion of ego, a personality, a being and a life¹. The Buddha said in the *Diamond Sutra*, ‘Of all dharmas, there is not a single one which possesses an ego, a personality, a being and a life.’² The four forms are not forms but false conceptions of non-awakened sentient beings. Therefore, ‘the Tathagata speaks of forms which are not forms and of living beings who are not living beings.’³ All the phenomena and sentient beings arise from multi-conditions. When causes meet conditions, forms arise; when causes and conditions end, the forms disappear. So the form itself has no self-nature and self-identity. It is provisional existent but not true existent. As the Buddha saying in *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, all the phenomena have illusory and ephemeral characteristics, ‘spring up in the very pot where they also come to an end’⁴. That is to say, all phenomena are to be perceived in resemblance to the successive illusory forms very rapidly arising and perishing. That is the reason why the Buddha saying, ‘everything with form is unreal; if all forms are seen as unreal, the Tathagata will be perceived.’⁵ Only when non-attachment to all forms, we can see through our true

¹ All beings regard the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, impulse, and consciousness as themselves. This is called the notion of self. The opposite of self is the notion of a personality, including human and non-human. The notion of a being is all phenomena arising from a ‘synergy of multi-conditions’. The notion of a life refers to the false perception of their life spans and time.

² Kumārajīva. Trans. 鳩摩羅什譯, *The Diamond Sutra*, 《金剛般若波羅蜜經》, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*, 《大正新修大藏經》第8冊, No.0235, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0235_001> [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <http://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_24_7318.html> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

³ Kumārajīva. Trans. 鳩摩羅什譯, *The Diamond Sutra*, 《金剛般若波羅蜜經》, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*, 《大正新修大藏經》第8冊, No.0235, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0235_001> [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <http://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_24_7318.html> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

⁴ Pramiti Trans. 般刺蜜帝譯, *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. Vol.3. 《楞嚴經》卷三, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T19n0945_003>, [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English translation by the Buddhist Text Translation Society. <<http://www.fodian.net/English/ps.ss.02.v3.020526.screen.pdf>> [Accessed on 23 November 2017]

⁵ Kumārajīva. Trans. 鳩摩羅什譯, *The Diamond Sutra*, 《金剛般若波羅蜜經》, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*, 《大正

nature. In this case, what we have cultivated are merits.

The key point of cultivating merits is not to attach to forms or not to abide anywhere when giving alms. As abiding forms is the overwhelming bad habit of all beings, we need to carefully observe and consider on the arising of thoughts. The alms-giver consists of one's mind and body. The mind cannot be held, as there are 90 *kṣaṇa*(刹那) in a moment, and 900 thoughts born and die in every *kṣaṇa*(刹那)¹, which is 4500 part of a minute. Since the thoughts in our mind arise and pass away rapidly without ceasing, we cannot depend on. Even not a single thought or mind is self. The body is temporarily composed of five aggregates 五蘊 (form, feeling, conception, impulse, and consciousness). Like all phenomena, the body forms when the multi-conditions coexist, but disappear instantaneously as these conditions non-exist. Therefore, the five aggregates of the body are without self. Thus, one can no longer attach to the notion that the alms-giver is me. The same principle applies to the person who has received alms. The recipient is also provisional existence, arising from cause and conditions. So the recipient is unavailable. By understanding the facts, one can give away the expectation of good returns from recipient. This is the way of practising non-attachment to notion of a personality. In addition, one can not dwell on the object that is given. The object is nothing more than six dusts, which is illusory and empty in true nature. Giving away the attachment to objects, one can give up the notion of beings. The dharma and the action of giving generate from causes and conditions, such as the alms-giver, the reception, and the objects of giving. The dharma have no self-identity. Therefore, one can

新修大藏經》第 8 冊, No.0235, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0235_001>[Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <http://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_24_7318.html> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

¹ Kumārajīva. Trans.鳩摩羅什譯, the *State-protecting Prajñāparamita Sutra Vol.1*《佛說仁王般若波羅蜜經》卷一 in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*,《大正新修大藏經》第 8 冊, No.0245, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0245_001> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

detach themselves from the dharma of giving. If one expected the future rewarding, he had clung to the notion of a life. Understanding the future rewarding is nothing more than unreal six dusts, one can remove this false notion.

If a person practises alms-giving and his pure mind without attachment to all forms and matters, he does not dwell on the form of dharma(existence). Namely, he cultivates supreme wisdom. Meanwhile, If a person does not abide anything but practise all good deeds. He does not dwell on the form of non-dharma(emptiness). In other words, he accumulates meritorious virtues. Such practice of non-attachment and accumulating merits and virtues can not only bring immeasurable merits to practitioner but also lead to the achievement of the Buddhahood. As the Buddha saying, ‘ The practice of all good virtues(Dharmas), free from attachment to an ego, a personality, a being and a life, will result in the attainment of Supreme Enlightenment.’¹

Thirdly, the benefits of almsgiving without dwelling on the idea of giving are immeasurable.

‘Subhuti, what do you think? Can you think of and measure the extent of space in the East?’

‘I cannot, World Honored One!’ ‘Subhuti, can you think of and measure (all) the extent of space in the South, West and North, as well as in the intermediate directions, including the zenith and nadir?’ ‘I cannot, World Honoured One!’ ‘Subhuti, (when) a Bodhisattva practices charity without a mind abiding in forms, his merit is equally inconceivable and immeasurable.’²

¹ Kumarajiva. Trans.鳩摩羅什譯, *The Diamond Sutra*, 《金剛般若波羅蜜經》, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*, 《大正新修大藏經》第8冊, No.0235, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0235_001> [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <http://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_24_7318.html> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

² Kumarajiva. Trans.鳩摩羅什譯, *The Diamond Sutra*, 《金剛般若波羅蜜經》, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*, 《大正新修大藏經》第8冊, No.0235, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0235_001> [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <http://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_24_7318.html> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

The dialogue between the Buddha and Subhuti above illustrates that the merits attained from the practice of not abiding on anything and giving alms are inconceivably and immeasurably as vast as a space. Why the practice can bring so many merits? According to *The Shurangama Sutra*, all phenomena are manifested by mind. And the Buddha said, ‘ You should know that the space created in your mind is like a wisp of cloud that dots the vast sky. How much smaller must all the worlds within that space be!’¹ This mind is the true mind, namely, the innate true nature. All Dharma including the worldly and beyond, as well as the space are manifested by our innate true nature. In other words, the true nature contains space and all Dharma(phenomena).

If Bodhisattvas practise good deeds with his mind detaching to anything, then his pure mind will match his true nature. The capacity of true nature is inconceivable and immeasurable. Correspondingly, the mind and merits of the practitioner is inconceivable and immeasurable. On the contrary, If Bodhisattvas practised good deeds with his mind attaching to something, when he practising good deeds, his delusive thoughts would arise, caring of gain and loss or differentiating self and others. In this case, his mind is polluted and narrow. Then he is not a real Bodhisattvas. As all Dharma are manifested by our true nature, altered by the consciousness(delusive thoughts). The six Directions of Reincarnation(six states of existence as heaven beings, human, asura 阿修羅, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings) would arise and transform according to the delusive thoughts. Living in the six destinies of birth and death, cultivating goodness will lead to the blessings in Three Good Path(the realm of heaven, human, asura 阿修羅), while doing evil will lead to suffering in Three Bad Realms(animal,

¹ Pramiti Trans. 般刺蜜帝譯, *The Shurangama Sutra. Vol.9. 《楞嚴經》卷九*, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.19, 《大正新修大藏經》第19冊*, No.0945, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T19n0945_009> [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <<http://www.heartspace.org/writings/traditional/ShurangamaSutra.html>> [Accessed on 19 November 2017]

hungry ghost, and hell). Therefore, practising virtuous conduits with attachment to forms will lead to limit good fortune in Six Directions of Reincarnation.

II .The analysis on the dialogue between Dharma Master Damou and Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty

Emperor Wu of Liang¹ was the first emperor of Nan Dynasty, who sincerely believed in Buddhism. He studied on Buddhist Sutra in depth and wrote hundreds of volumes commentaries on some Buddhist texts. In addition, he held various Dharma assemblies and preached the teachings of the Sutra. He also supported the translation and compilation of Buddhist scriptures. What he did was the giving of wisdom. What's more, He became a vegan and ordered monks and disciples to become vegans, since then, Chinese Buddhism has formed the vegetarian tradition. He did not kill animals and further banned to kill animals as sacrifices in the ancestral temple. In other words, he practised lots of the giving of fearless. Moreover, the emperor Wu had discarded his throne and become a monk in a monastery for four times as well as donated his property to build many monasteries and to support monks. Emperor Wu did a lot of the giving of wealth.

He observes precepts sincerely, accepting and upholding Bodhisattva Precepts from Zen master Hui Yue.² Hence, people called Emperor Wu as Emperor Bodhisattva. One year after taking Bodhisattva Precepts, Emperor Wu greeted Dharma Master Damou at the imperial palace.

¹ AD 464-549

² *The biography of the Dharma Master of Cao Tang Temple, Ven. Shi, Hui Yue, Part 2*, 《梁國師草堂寺智者釋慧約傳二》, in *The Continued Series of Biography of The Eminent Monks Vol.6*, 出自《續高僧傳》卷六, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.50*, 《大正新修大藏經》第 50 冊, No.2060, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T50n2060_006> [Accessed on 13 November 2017]

Emperor asked, ‘Since I took the throne, I have built lots of monasteries, published many scriptures and supported innumerable monks and nuns to be ordained. What merit is there in all of these?’

Master Tamo answered, ‘No merit at all.’ Emperor did not understand and asked again, ‘Why there is no merit?’ Master answered, ‘these are lower level of attainment of blessings in the heaven and earth, as the good causes being planted with afflictions. This is similar to the shadows being reflected by the bodily forms. It seems to exist but in actuality it is unreal.’ Emperor asked again, ‘What is the real merit?’ Master answered, ‘the subtle perfection of pure wisdom, the noumenon (true nature) is empty and tranquil. Such merit cannot be attained by the mundane cognition and view.’¹

Emperor Wu had cultivated great giving to support Buddhism, he asked Master Tamo immediately how great is the merit when they first met. The question indicates Emperor Wu practised giving in order to gain merits, so he had attached to forms. More specifically, he was proud that he could practise such many charities. This illustrates that he regarded self as a real existence. Hence he had already clung to the notion of ego. As he attached to supporting monks, he had already clung to the notion of personality. He regarded building temples and publishing scriptures as real, thus he had clung to the notion of beings. He attached to the conception of time and the mark of continuity, from his words of ‘since I inherited the throne’ and ‘innumerable and uncountable’. This manifests he had already clung to the notion of a lifespan. As a result of attachment to four forms, the illusory thoughts were his master. Therefore, he did not see through the truth and his true nature. Although practising great virtuous conducts, he gained only good fortune in the realm of heaven and

¹ Shi Dao Yuan 釋道原, *The records of the transmission of the lamp Vol.3* 《景德傳燈錄》卷三, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.51*, 《大正新修大藏經》第 51 冊, No.2076. <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/ko/T51n2076_003> [Accessed on 13 November 2017]

human. With delusive and attached mind, what Emperor Wu of Liang had done only became ‘the causes of defilement’. Such defective causes lead to defective consequence. Namely, when the Emperor was reborn as a human being or a heaven being to enjoy the limited good fortune, he would fall into The Three Bad Realms¹ to experience life and death when running out of his good fortune. As a result of cultivating only good fortune but not wisdom, Emperor Wu would not transcend Six Directions of Reincarnation. Therefore, Master Tamo said, such good fortune is a delusion, like a shadow following its bodily forms.

‘The subtle perfection of pure wisdom’ is prajñā 般若 (innate wisdom). ‘The noumenon is empty and tranquil’ is the true nature. ‘The real merit’ can only be gained when cultivating virtuous conducts with prajñā wisdom. It is the virtue that enable us to see through the true nature and achieve the supreme enlightenment. Therefore, the master said, this real merit cannot be gained by the mundane method of attachment to forms and giving alms.

Although Emperor Wu had observed Bodhisattva Precepts, he could not detached from forms. Thus, he had not reached the standard of cultivating Bodhisattvas practices. The Buddha said in *The Diamond Sutra*, ‘if a Bodhisattva still clings to the false notion(laksana 相) of an ego, a personality, a being and a life, he is not a true Bodhisattva.²’ Namely, if a Bodhisattva attaches to the false notions, then he would regard the illusions as reality and lose his true nature. As the saying goes in *The Diamond Sutra*,

*‘if a Bodhisattva practises charity (dana 布施) with a mind abiding in things (dharma 法),
he is like a man entering the darkness where he cannot see anything; (but) if a Bodhisattva
practises dana with a mind not abiding in dharma, he is like a man with open eyes, who can see*

¹ The three lower realms of the hell, hungry ghost, animals are merely the retribution of improper speech, bodily action, and thoughts.

² Kumarajiva. Trans. 鳩摩羅什譯, *The Diamond Sutra*, 《金剛般若波羅蜜經》, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*, 《大正新修大藏經》第8冊, No.0235, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0235_001> [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <http://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_24_7318.html> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

*everything in the sunshine.'*¹

Since Emperor Wu had practised charity with deep attachment to forms, he did not understand the true meaning of Buddha's teaching and could not see the truth. Eventually, his severe attachment and obsession resulted in the misfortunes of him and the whole country. The misfortunes and damage can be seen more clearly in the following three aspects.

Firstly, even though Emperor Wu himself attained good fortune throughout his lifetime practices, but he could not liberate himself from karmic(業) retribution, and suffered from captivity during the end of his life. Secondly, Emperor Wu discarded his throne and became a monk in Tongtai temple for four times. His ministers had to donate four hundreds of million in all to the temple to redeem the emperor. As a result, the national treasury was empty which influenced the operation of national affairs and the lives of the people. In his old age, due to focusing on the research of scriptures and self-cultivation, he lost his interest in governing state affairs and appointed a traitorous minister who rebelled against him later. This caused the decay of his whole country and the suffering and slaughter of his people. Thirdly, the excessive attachment to the notion of Buddhism, Emperor Wu had built so many monasteries to support monks. According to the records in *The Book of Liang*, there were more than two thousand temples and over eight hundreds thousand monks and nuns in his country.² In contrast to the humble and crude houses of common people, these monasteries were built extremely magnificently with rich property. Without the inspection of the practice of all

¹ Kumarajiva. Trans.鳩摩羅什譯, *The Diamond Sutra*, 《金剛般若波羅蜜經》, in *The Chinese Buddhist Canon Vol.8*, 《大正新修大藏經》第8冊, No.0235, <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T08n0235_001> [Accessed on 15 November 2017] English Translation: <http://www.lingyinsi.org/detail_24_7318.html> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

² When the Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty was on the throne, there were 2846 temples and 820 thousand monks and nuns in his country. <<http://www.hanshansi.org/download/zx/200802/200802f007.htm>> [Accessed on 18 November 2017]

monks and nuns, many monks and nuns did not abide by the teachings in the sutra. They supported lay people not to join in registration and engage in farming, and eventually became a burden for the whole country. Due to these negative effects on Buddhism, the Buddha-dharma was misunderstood and blamed by some people and was inhibited by some later emperors. So fierce is the misfortune derived from the practice of attachment to forms. Should we be fearful!

Conclusion

From the perspective of outward action, the practice of attachment to forms and cultivating good fortune and virtues looks like the same as the practice of non-attachment to forms and cultivating merits and virtues. But they are very different in the mind and consequence. Modern people should learn *the Diamond Sutra* to keep their pure mind, not attaching to forms and not abiding anything when giving alms. Through this practice, we can not only accumulate good fortune and merits but also achieve supreme enlightenment. Through this practice, we can bring happiness and benefits to all beings, bring peace and prosperity to the whole world. Such an excellent cultivation method, it would be a great loss, if we do not follow!

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