Pahankanuwa Sermon #122

English Translation

Translated from Sinhala

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(Pahankaṇuwa Sinhala Audio Dhamma Sermon No.57)

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

(Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Fully Self-Enlightened One)

Pali Stanza:

Māppamaññetha puññassa, na maṃ taṃ āgamissati;

Udabindunipātena, udakumbho pi pūrati;

Pūrati dhīro puññassa, thokathokampi ācinaṃ ti.

From:

Dhammapada 122 (Pāpavagga)

Dear Listeners,

The Teacher of the Three Worlds, the Blessed Buddha, clearly explained to the world that the fundamental force that brings about true progress and true development while wandering in saṃsāra is the power of merit. We all know that the core principle of the Buddhist way of life is refraining from evil and inclining towards merit. The Blessed Buddha constantly points out to us, amidst the various values in the world, the value that must be given to merit, as well as the worth of accumulating merit.

It is precisely this matter that is emphatically demonstrated in the stanza taken as today's theme, and in its corresponding background story. During the time the Blessed Buddha was residing at the Jetavana monastery in Sāvatthī, the people of Sāvatthī used to gather in groups and had a regular system of almsgiving, a rotational method of offering alms to the Community of Monks headed by the Buddha. On one occasion, at the conclusion of that alms-giving, the Blessed Buddha delivered the following sermon as an appreciation:

"Lay devotees, if someone gives alms himself but does not encourage others to adopt the practice of giving alms, nor does he involve them; such a person, in whatever place he is born, receives the fortune of wealth, but does not receive the fortune of followers. Secondly, another person does not give alms himself but encourages others to give alms. Such a person, in whatever place he is born, does not receive the

fortune of wealth, but receives the fortune of followers. Yet a third person neither gives alms himself nor encourages others to give alms, nor makes them adopt the practice. Such a person receives neither the fortune of wealth nor the fortune of followers. Fourthly, it is shown that another person gives alms himself and also encourages others to adopt the practice of giving alms. Such a person, in whatever place he is born in saṃsāra, receives both the fortune of wealth and the fortune of followers."

A wise lay devotee who was listening to this sermon thought, "This is a great wonder. I must act in such a way as to obtain both of these fortunes." Having made a firm determination, as the Blessed Buddha was preparing to depart after the Dhamma sermon, this man went forward and invited the Blessed Buddha, saying: "Venerable Sir, Blessed One, please accept alms from us tomorrow."

"How many monks do you require?" the Blessed Buddha asked. "The entire Saṅgha of monks. My invitation is to the entire Saṅgha headed by the Buddha," he replied. The Blessed Buddha expressed his consent to it. "Tushnīmbhūta" means he accepted it silently. Now, this man, this lay devotee, then went to the village and went from house to house, calling out: "Fathers, I have invited the Saṅgha of monks headed by the Buddha for alms tomorrow. To the extent that each of you is able, in whatever measure you can give alms to the monks, bring those provisions, and let us gather in one place to prepare the alms-giving." Making this proclamation, this man went from house to house.

While going around in this manner, he also went to the shop of a certain treasurer—"treasurer" means a person like a modern-day businessman or merchant. At that time, this treasurer developed a kind of envious and hostile thought regarding this matter: "This man, instead of inviting a number of monks that he himself is capable of feeding, has started an impossible task and is walking through the village shouting." What did he do next? As if in mockery, he said, "Come, bring it, I too shall give a contribution," and gripping with three fingers, he gave the man three grains of rice, a few mung beans, some black-eyed peas, and dipping a ladle into the vessels of oil, ghee, and honey, he gave just a few drops. This lay devotee took the alms-materials given by others into one vessel but took the things given by this treasurer into a separate vessel. Seeing this, the treasurer became suspicious: "This man might humiliate me in some way." In the meantime, those who were watching this event—it seems that in India at that time, just as it might be today, people in the villages were very clever at coining nicknames—coined a name for this treasurer: "Cat's Foot Treasurer" (*Bilālapādaka Seṭṭhi*). Because he gave grains of rice using three fingers like a cat grabbing something with its paw, they sarcastically dubbed this treasurer "Bilālapādaka Seṭṭhi" or "Cat's Foot Treasurer." In any case, what did this treasurer do? As the lay devotee was leaving with the goods, he secretly sent one of his servants behind him, saying, "Go watch what he does with this and come back and tell me."

This lay devotee did not throw those things away. What did he do? He went to the place where the alms-meal was being prepared, and into every vessel preparing gruel, rice, and so forth, he put two grains of rice, two mung beans, and two black-eyed peas. Into the vessels preparing oil-cakes and such, he dropped those drops of honey and oil. He did so while wishing, "May this be of great fruit and great benefit to the treasurer! May this alms-giving be of great fruit to the treasurer!" Having watched this, the servant returned and told the treasurer. Yet, the treasurer's heart did not soften or become tender. The treasurer thought, "Very well, we shall see tomorrow as well. Tomorrow, after the alms have been given to the Saṅgha headed by the Buddha, if he mentions my name and humiliates me, I know what I will do." Thus, on the day of the alms-giving, this treasurer went carrying a sharp weapon, like a dagger, tucked into his waist, thinking, "The moment he humiliates me, I will (stab) this man..." With such a hostile mind, this treasurer went and stood watching.

Behold, the alms-giving activities were concluded beautifully. In the end, that chief lay donor said to the Blessed Buddha: "Venerable Sir, Blessed One, in this alms-giving we offered today, everyone participated, each according to their capacity. Some gave much, some gave a little. May this alms-giving be equally of great fruit to all of them!" When he heard this, a great pang of remorse arose in the treasurer: "Alas! Was I not coming to kill such a person?" He stepped forward, fell prostrate at his feet, and begged for forgiveness. When asked what the reason for this was, the treasurer related the whole story. The Blessed Buddha, having watched to see what was happening, also asked the chief lay donor what the cause of this was. Once that matter was explained, at that moment, the Blessed Buddha said to the treasurer: "Treasurer, even if you give a small thing to the Saṅgha headed by the Buddha, do not think of it as trivial. Do not look down upon it. Do not regard it as a small thing. Wise individuals, even by performing merit little by little, become filled with merit." To illustrate this, he gave the simile of a vessel placed outside during the rain, being filled with water as drops accumulate. This is the idea contained in the stanza we have taken as our theme:

Mā puññassa na maṃ taṃ āgamissati

"Do not underestimate merit, thinking 'how will this merit come to me?' Do not regard it as trivial."

Udabindu nipātena udakumbho'pi pūrati

"Even a water-pot is filled by the falling of water-drops." And likewise,

Pūrati dhīro puññassa thokathokam pi ācinaṃ.

"Gathering it little by little, the wise person, the learned person, fills himself with merit." In this manner, the Blessed Buddha preached. Having heard the Dhamma sermon delivered along with that stanza, a great multitude realized the fruits of the path. Here, a specific detail is mentioned which some might find doubtful: that the aforementioned treasurer also became a Stream-Enterer (*Sotāpanna*). Be that as it

may, that is how the story goes. Next, let us see if there is something we can extract from this story for our own lives.

Indeed, even if we look at it from the beginning, the Blessed Buddha's teaching itself is a revelation that brings great peace to the world. For we all know that alms-giving is a good practice. However, as something equally valuable that goes hand-in-hand with giving alms, encouraging others to give alms is shown here, and the word used for it is *samādāna*. Merit-seekers can understand from this how the meanings of these words change over time. The word usually applied to virtue is used here: *samādāna*—meaning "undertaking virtue" or "making someone undertake virtue." Yet, in current usage concerning money or donations, the word used is *sammādam*, rather than making individuals undertake a practice. The fundamental meaning of *samādāna* here, however, is making someone accept and adopt the practice of alms-giving.

Just as "undertaking virtue" means causing someone to adopt the practice of virtue, making someone adopt the practice of alms-giving is the fundamental meaning of *samādāna* here. However, nowadays, when referring to alms, that word has become *sammādama*. It has shifted towards a donation drive, towards the economic side. The success of a *sammādama* is judged by the total sum on the collection list. But if we think deeply, those who go on collection drives should realize that, in truth, our objective must be to accustom people to the practice of giving, allowing them to give something according to their individual capacity. It is not the amount received that is important there. If we look at it that way, then we could also say we "collected virtue." Giving virtue is like making people undertake virtue, because it causes them to adopt the practice of virtue. In the same way, it causes them to adopt the practice of alms-giving. A prime example of this is found in this very story. Indeed, we can understand that this wise lay devotee, whose name is not even mentioned here, was a person of exceptionally noble character. Those who organize meritorious deeds in this day and age receive a good lesson and a fine example from this lay devotee. For if we look closely, we can see a wealth of virtues in this story. One of these is the power of determination of that lay devotee.

How serious a task is it to invite the Saṅgha headed by the Buddha for the following day! If one cannot manage it properly, how would it feel? The entire noble Saṅgha headed by the Buddha would go hungry the next day. Yet, such was the mental strength of that man—as the saying goes, "if there is a will, is the vessel too small?"—due to his faith and the right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) engendered by that Dhamma sermon, he took a massive burden upon his shoulders. But he possessed the capacity to match it. He had a spirit of sacrifice to match it. He possessed the sublime abodes of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity to match it. Moreover, he proceeded in accordance with the principles of the triumph of Dhamma. Because of this, that lay devotee was able to accomplish that objective.

Now, these merit-seekers know that when organizing such meritorious activities, various unexpected troubles and opposition arise from society. An example of this is the treasurer's mockery and his words. Yet, this man was not shaken. An ordinary person might have thrown those things aside, or perhaps a dispute would have ensued, demanding, "Why are you insulting me?" None of that occurred. He humbly took what was given, and placing it in a separate vessel was also done with a great purpose. Furthermore, we can see this person's humility; in those days there were no loudspeakers like today, so he used his own voice, going around to collect alms calling out, "Mothers, Fathers." Calling them "Mothers, Fathers" conveys a profound sense of equality. It was with such an attitude, with great compassion and loving-kindness, that this man placed even what was received as mockery from the treasurer, little by little, into the large vessels so that it would become of great fruit and great benefit. That is what true *sammādama* is called.

Often in this day and age, though perhaps not among these merit-seekers, there are some who, when participating in such donation collections, bow down repeatedly before wealthy and influential people, using all kinds of flattering words, hoping for a large donation and striving to obtain it. On the other hand, if a very helpless, poor person, who barely has enough to eat for the day, gives a small sum of money as a great sacrifice, they insult that person, saying, "Keep this safe for yourself," and finally turn away. Some people possess that kind of attitude. There is no sense of equality there. This man was not like that; even though the treasurer was capable of giving but gave in a mocking, contemptuous manner, he did not become disillusioned. Instead, with great compassion, loving-kindness, and equanimity, he acted in a way that would bring blessing to that treasurer. Had he not done so, lives might have been lost. This is an excellent example for those who organize meritorious activities in this day and age: what kind of inner strength is required to perform a great task. It is when this is lacking that various conflicts are created, corrupting the minds of others as well as one's own, eventually leading to insults toward the Triple Gem and alienation from meritorious deeds. Therefore, we must derive the necessary benefits from this side of the story as well.

Even if we do not speak of the Greatly Compassionate Blessed Buddha anew, these merit-seekers know of the immense depth in every word he preached, in accordance with his wondrous great compassion and wisdom. Now, the stanza these merit-seekers heard here was actually not part of the appreciation given to the chief lay donor. It was an appreciation given for the small alms of rice grains and mung beans offered by that treasurer who had received the name "Cat's Foot Treasurer." Keep that well in mind. The Blessed Buddha consoled that person with this stanza. At that moment, that person must have felt a great sense of spiritual urgency (*saṃvega*) and regret, thinking, "Alas! Was it to such a person that I did such a thing? Did I not give a mere trifle to the Saṅgha headed by the Buddha?" But the Blessed Buddha, out of great compassion, consoled him. "Do not think so, lay devotee. Do not think of it as a small thing. By offering even small things to a Saṅgha like this, doing so step-by-step, one can eventually become filled with merit." Thus, consoling his mind, he delivered

a sermon in a way that inspired great faith in the Triple Gem. It is that sermon that we have taken as our theme for these merit-seekers today.

Thus we see that the Blessed Buddha did not deliver that sermon to flatter the chief lay donor. He delivered that sermon in a way that would reform the person who did not know the Dhamma and who still had weaknesses, in a way that would bring him solace. Therefore, the report mentioned at the end of the story—which at first glance might seem like a question to us—that the treasurer became a Stream-Enterer, is perhaps not surprising. Often, such supermundane leaps, falling into those stages, occur through a sudden mental revolution. Through that, a profound understanding arises. Whether this was such an instance, we do not know. It is quite possible. That is how the actions of that wise lay devotee and the words of the Blessed Buddha unfolded. Thus, we can learn many things from this story.

Next, let us consider the idea of merit presented by the Blessed Buddha in this stanza. Although, according to the Dhamma, merit and demerit should be a matter of practice for Buddhists in that manner, many consider gold, silver, pearls, and gems—which have temporary value in this world—to be more valuable. But if we think about it, in accordance with the Dhamma, according to the Dhamma preached by the Blessed Buddha, merit is like a gold coin of eternal value that is not subject to the economic inflations of the world. For whether Buddhas arise or do not arise, whether it is an era of a Buddha's appearance or not, by that very nature of reality, the power of benefit and the power of result of merit are never lost. It has eternal value. If there were no such eternal value, one could not fulfill the perfections through merit. A Buddha would not arise; a Pacceka Buddha would not arise; an Arahant would not arise. For whatever was done would simply end right there. But this, in truth, is part of the law of kamma. These merit-seekers have often heard that everyone owns only the kamma they perform—*kammassaka*. Kamma is one's inheritance, kamma determines one's birth, kamma is one's kinsman, kamma is one's refuge. This is part of the Blessed Buddha's teaching on kamma. We carry with us both demerit and merit. We carry the kamma we perform. Here, the emphasis is on merit. The Blessed Buddha declares that the true treasure, the true wealth a person has in this world, is merit—the fortune of merit. These merit-seekers have also often heard many of the Blessed Buddha's sermons on this subject during alms-giving and other meritorious activities. But we must not dismiss them as trivial merely because we have heard them often. There is a deep meaning there. The most valuable thing that helps us succeed in our future saṃsāric lives through our own mind-stream, or to achieve the targets we set as aspirations, is this thing indicated by the word "merit."

Furthermore, in a lengthy sermon, the Blessed Buddha on one occasion described this mass of merit as a treasure. In those days, great wealthy merchants would hide and deposit their wealth as "treasures" on riverbanks, leaving some sign known only to themselves. Instead of banks as we have today, they buried treasures in the ground, either in the forest or somewhere else. By burying treasures in this way, what did they expect? "In the event of royal danger—which would be lawsuits in modern

terms—or illness, famine, or times of scarcity, these treasures will be my refuge." Even though they thought so, sometimes those treasures could be swept away by the river. The signs placed there could be forgotten. Or else, someone they disliked, or thieves, could come and dig them up and take them away. In this way, even while they are alive, treasures are lost and destroyed; they can even be destroyed by fire, and so on. In this modern era, various words like deposits and savings are used for what ordinary people accumulate. Most people nowadays focus only on those things. But what remains and is deposited for the entirety of saṃsāric existence is this very treasure of merit. That is why the Blessed Buddha points to it as a following treasure. When one dies and passes away, the power of merit has the strength to bring along even the assets of rebirth needed for the next state of becoming.

Asādhāraṇam-aññesaṃ, acora-haraṇo nidhi,

Kayirātha dhīro puññāni, yo nidhi anugāmino.

There is a well-known stanza: "It is not shared with others" means others cannot take that merit—even if they wish to share it, they can only do so through appreciation. "Thieves cannot steal it." Therefore, the Blessed Buddha points out in various ways that wise individuals should perform merit, which is a following treasure. When we say "merit," what is currently in the minds of these merit-seekers is the merit of giving. But in the Dhamma, three bases of meritorious activity are shown: consisting in giving, consisting in virtue, and consisting in mental cultivation. All of these belong to this.

Thus, it is through the treasure of merit accumulated through giving, virtue, and mental cultivation that a Buddha is born in the world, a Buddha arises, a Pacceka Buddha arises, and Arahants and various great disciples are obtained. Because this is something of eternal value that is not subject to inflation. If these changed from time to time, one could not fulfill one's aspiration. Precisely because it does not change, birth after birth that merit accumulates, deposited in this consciousness. Due to that very karmic energy, it leads to a corresponding direction, even without special wishes. This is the power of benefit in those merits. These merit-seekers know, to give an example, that when speaking of food, because long life, beauty, happiness, strength, and wisdom are present in that food, it is said that one can also obtain long life, beauty, happiness, strength, and wisdom. Similarly, if there are specific energies inherent to the things given, the results and benefits can be obtained correspondingly and in a fitting manner. Indeed, if one keeps a suitable attitude, a prepared mind for performing merit, performing merit is not difficult. Wondrously, the wise person can spend his life in such a way that he is constantly filled with merit.

These merit-seekers have often heard the saying, "giving alms with a purified mind in three stages." Before giving, one generates joy. While giving, one generates devotion. When giving alms to the Saṅgha headed by the Buddha, to those endowed with virtues, one generates devotion and faith. Then, after giving, one rejoices over it. Out of the three stages of mind of the aforementioned treasurer, the first two were

defiled. But the Blessed Buddha preached that stanza in that manner at least to reform his final stage of mind, so that he would not regret it, but think of what he gave as a significant thing. Therefore, merit-seekers must contemplate preparing a suitable attitude even before giving alms. One must give alms endowed with faith as well as right view, which is the belief in kamma and its fruits. If one has that confidence, that right view of believing in kamma and its fruits, then during alms-giving and other such activities, one is not shaken by the blame or praise of the world. Whether people blame or praise, one must make a firm determination: "the inherent result of the merit will come to me." Because that lay devotee possessed these, he was not shaken, though obstacles came from various people in the world. Having overcome all of those, if one has right view regarding merit, thinking, "the more difficulty with which I performed this, the greater the merit," then that merit becomes even stronger.

The merit consisting in virtue is similar. The Blessed Buddha sometimes refers to it as a gift. Keeping the five precepts is described as five great gifts. For there, too, a massive sacrifice is made. The Blessed Buddha declared that the merit-seeker who, having made the determination to abstain from destroying life, keeps that training rule, gives safety and non-enmity to infinite, boundless beings. Therefore, it is shown that even recluses and brahmins accept this as a great gift. Likewise is the merit consisting in mental cultivation. In this, too, there is great merit in spreading the energy present in thoughts of loving-kindness and so forth to the world. Going hand-in-hand with the power of merit is what we call "wholesome." These merit-seekers often find that the two words *kusala* and *puñña* are frequently used synonymously. Generally, the word *kusala* carries the meaning of "skillful"—skillfulness in performing merit, as well as generating thoughts that allow one to act in a skillful manner regarding one's future journey in saṃsāra. These merit-seekers know that one must perform merit by pushing away the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion, and bringing forth thoughts of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.

Regarding merit, elsewhere it is presented as the ten bases of meritorious activity. These merit-seekers have often heard it expressed in a stanza:

Dānaṃ sīlañca bhāvanā, patti pattānumodanā,

Veyyāvaccāpacāyañca, desanā suti diṭṭhiju.

This stanza indicates the well-known paths of performing merit. The bases of meritorious activity mean the objects of performing merit, or the topics that assist them: alms-giving, virtue, mental cultivation, sharing of merit, appreciation of merit, service, reverence, expounding the Dhamma, listening to the Dhamma, and straightening of views. Thus, a section called the ten bases of meritorious activity is shown. In whatever manner they are performed, this is a certain energy generated within our mind-stream. Over a long period in saṃsāra, this merit possesses the power to bring about all things—the assets of rebirth that assist becoming and

support life, various strengths such as long life and beauty, wealth, fortune of assets, and fortune of followers.

Finally, if one has kept a certain goal, determination, or aspiration, this merit also has the quality of fulfilling it. That is why the Blessed Buddha points so strongly to merit as the highest fortune in the world, the greatest saṃsāric fortune, and something towards which one should be so enthusiastic. Furthermore, as is mentioned here too, do not regard merit as small. It accumulates. Merit adds to merit. As they accumulate and the power of merit grows, a massive transformation takes place within that individual.

In short, we must realize that our present life, our birth, and this current peace we enjoy, even though invisible to us, are due to past merit. Therefore, should we squander and deplete that merit, or should we direct our minds further towards merit and lead that saṃsāric existence through a successful life towards Nibbāna? This is what we must contemplate and decide. Various values in the world change at different times. The prices of gold, silver, and so forth fluctuate. Banknotes are sometimes invalidated overnight. Such is the nature of the wealth accepted by worldly convention. Likewise, things kept as treasures are sometimes destroyed, falling prey to thieves, rulers, fire, or water. But it is the power of merit built up in our mind-stream that ultimately helps us. Hence, on certain occasions, the Blessed Buddha has declared:

Mā puññānaṃ bhāyittha, sukhassetaṃ bhikkhave adhivacanaṃ, iṭṭhassa kantassa piyassa manāpassa yadidaṃ puññāni.

"Monks, do not fear merit. For 'merit' is another name for happiness, which is extremely desirable, lovely, pleasing, and agreeable." The Blessed Buddha pointed this out in that manner because he delivered that sermon based on his own direct realization.

"I say this because I have directly realized this myself. For during my time as a Bodhisatta, over a long period, I experienced the benefits of the merits I accumulated in saṃsāra. That is why I am declaring a truth I have experienced," the Blessed Buddha said on that occasion. Then, he gave an example. Having developed a mind of loving-kindness for seven years, I spent seven eons of world-contraction and world-expansion in the Brahma realms. Next, as the direct benefit of developing those seven minds of loving-kindness, of practicing the meditation on loving-kindness, thirty-six times I became Sakka, the king of devas. Many hundreds of times I obtained the position of a wheel-turning monarch. There is no need even to mention the number of times I ruled as a regional king. "I reaped such a massive harvest of benefits," the Blessed Buddha declared from his own direct realization, adding, "Then, while enjoying those results and benefits, I reviewed and saw: 'from where do I receive such fortunes, and because of what?'" At that point, although he spoke of the mind of loving-kindness, he encapsulated something even deeper: "All of this is the result of three practices: giving, self-taming, and self-control." "Dāna" is

alms-giving. "Dama" is taming, which refers to virtue and so forth. "Saṃyama" is restraint of the mind, which is related to meditation. Thus, in a person who practices the meditation on loving-kindness, the mind of giving, as well as the virtue that assists it, all develop. When we speak of "merit" here, it encompasses the aforementioned threefold mass of merit: giving, virtue, and mental cultivation.

It is what arose through all of those that brought such great benefits to the Bodhisatta. Similarly, we must contemplate that we may have various goals and purposes in our daily lives. But all of those things that are considered major in the ordinary world are only for this life; they are temporary things. But because one has to travel in saṃsāra for a long time, what actually helps a person is the treasure of wealth deposited in one's mind-stream. That is what the Blessed Buddha has shown as merit. Furthermore, these merit-seekers have also often heard the Blessed Buddha pointing out that, among these three meritorious deeds, the meritorious deed consisting in virtue is superior to the meritorious deed consisting in giving. Even superior to that is the meritorious deed consisting in mental cultivation.

Next, there are various levels within alms-giving itself. This, indeed, is something these merit-seekers should also pay attention to. Just as was mentioned regarding the occasion of giving alms, when offering alms, there is the "fortune of the giver"—the true state of being a donor. Next, the "fortune of the gift" refers to the righteousness, purity, and suitability of the thing given. Next, the "fortune of the recipient" refers to the virtue of the receiving party. A meritorious deed complete in these three aspects is considered an excellent, exquisite, and superior merit. One must be mindful of these. For if one is immoral and gives for worldly pride, filling the mind with various defiled thoughts and wrong views, it is impure on the donor's side. Next, if the gift is given as if thrown away—meaning a worthless thing, like throwing something one wishes to discard—and if that given object was acquired in an unrighteous manner, then the fortune of the gift is not complete.

Next, regarding the fortune of the recipient, the Blessed Buddha specifically declares it is the virtue of the receiving party. The Blessed Buddha has analyzed this in detail in certain sutta discourses. Perhaps these merit-seekers have also heard of this. Fourteen types of individual offerings are shown—how the benefits of alms given to fourteen types of individuals vary and differ. At the lowest level, even alms given to an animal has a hundredfold benefit. In this manner, the Blessed Buddha points out that, compared to what is given to an animal, if given to a worldling of developed mind—even though immoral—alms given to an immoral worldling is a thousandfold beneficial. Next, if given to a virtuous worldling, an ordinary person, it brings a hundred-thousandfold or ten-thousandfold benefit. Next, it is said that alms given to disciples outside of this dispensation who are free from passion—meaning they have removed lust and elevated their minds through their respective meditations—brings a hundred-thousand eon-fold benefit.

From there onwards, it refers to those who have achieved supermundane states, or those preparing to achieve supermundane states, who have entered the path to

Stream-Entry. Going step-by-step in that manner, it culminates with alms offered to an Arahant, a Pacceka Buddha, or a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha. Regarding those, it is described as incalculable and immeasurable. It is said that they cannot be quantified. Quantification was done only regarding the first three or four types mentioned. The Blessed Buddha constantly emphasized and showed that such a wondrous mass of benefit, a torrent of merit, flows from this merit, from a meritorious thought.

An offering to the Saṅgha is shown to be far more beneficial than any individual offering. In this regard, seven types of alms-giving to the Saṅgha are mentioned. Fundamentally, during the Blessed Buddha's lifetime, alms given to the Saṅgha headed by the Buddha is the most beneficial. Less beneficial than that is the alms given to the Saṅgha of monks after the Blessed Buddha's parinibbāna. Next, to the Saṅgha of bhikkhunīs, and so on, shown step-by-step. The discourses often emphasize the end-part more than the beginning. But we can see that even in an offering to the Saṅgha, it is according to the quality of virtue that an alms-offering becomes of great fruit and great benefit. Even at the lowest level, it is beneficial. However, we must strive, as donor merit-seekers, to make that merit as complete as possible. As the Blessed Buddha has shown through a simile, there is a field for sowing merit. That is those endowed with virtues. The Saṅgha is described as "puññakkhettaṃ anuttaraṃ" (an unsurpassed field of merit)—it is like a field of merit. For it is when alms are given to those endowed with virtues that it becomes extremely beneficial.

Now, if a seed of paddy accidentally falls onto fertile ground while someone is carrying a sack of paddy, a large bush of paddy grows from it. Likewise, even unknowingly, if one gets the opportunity to offer alms to a person of supermundane virtue—to a Pacceka Buddha, a Buddha, or an Arahant—it yields an extremely wondrous power of benefit. The Blessed Buddha reminds the world that such a natural law exists in the world. This is precisely why it is said, "do not regard merit as small." If one has strong faith, there are many stories in ancient Buddhist literature of extremely poor people offering their own food to a monk on pindapata, or to a member of the Saṅgha. The merit obtained through that is sometimes far superior to a vast amount of wealth given for worldly pride without faith or right view, using unrighteously acquired wealth. Yet, to someone looking at the contribution list, that is a trivial thing, something they would turn away from with contempt, saying, "keep that safe for yourself." But according to that individual's mental purity, that alms-giving becomes of great fruit and great benefit. Knowing this, as related in this story, that wise lay donor engaged in that collection work righteously and humbly, with a sense of equality, without allowing his mind to be corrupted regarding any individual.

Similarly, merit-seekers must always contemplate that we should constantly live with a meritorious mind. When an opportunity to perform merit arises, we can only benefit from it if our mind has been prepared for it beforehand. There is a great

depth in the phrase "pubbeva dānā sumano" (cheerful before giving). It is not merely the joy felt at the moment of giving alms. It is only the person who lives with the thought, "Oh, if only I could find an opportunity to give alms," who will not miss the opportunity when it arises, but will benefit from it. At that time, to the world, the objects given in alms might seem like things that person did not need much. But the Blessed Buddha reminds us that the mental strength generated through the intention of giving within that concept of alms-giving brings immense benefits.

Just like alms-giving, so is virtue, which we sometimes regard as minor. Now, these merit-seekers might think, "What is this keeping of the five precepts other than just undertaking training rules?" But we can see the difference between keeping the five precepts and not keeping them. Some of these merit-seekers have heard of certain famous people in the world who, without even knowing this training rule against killing, or without caring about it, spent their entire lives performing various acts in the world. We must think about this. It is not impossible for our own minds to be prepared to do such a thing. We possess the mental capacity to bring about a highly dangerous state of crime in the world, yet instead, we tread this path. Then, looking at the opposite side of that training rule, we see the truth of the Blessed Buddha's words. It is like giving safety to infinite, boundless beings. The person who properly keeps that training rule has given safety to infinite, boundless beings. There is a difference between the evaluation standard of the world and the evaluation standard of the Blessed Buddha. What the world considers high, visible things, the Blessed Buddha regards as minor, coarse things, and points out that there are things far superior to them.

When it is said that virtue is superior to alms-giving, some might doubt it. But from this, we can see the beneficial aspect of virtue, just like the beneficial aspect of alms-giving. According to the example we mentioned, if one person keeps the five precepts in that way, then two, three, a whole nation, a country, the world—what a massive difference! In that case, restraining the physical body and speech is a great sacrifice. One might feel like killing an animal, or stealing, or doing other things. Through all of those, trouble is caused to society as well as to oneself. Even if a temporary happiness, profit, or benefit is obtained, sacrificing that is what is called virtue. Next, it is said that mental cultivation is even superior to that. To the world, mental cultivation might sometimes appear to be an anti-social activity. One might think, "When there is so much concern about the economy and cultivation, why should someone meditate?" But the Blessed Buddha points out that the meditative energy arising in a single individual's thought can sometimes bring peace to the entire world.

Conversely, a single individual's thought can also destroy a world. What we call mental cultivation is making the mind, preparing the mind. The Blessed Buddha has spoken wondrously, especially about the meditation on loving-kindness. The high level of concentration developed through the meditation on loving-kindness is called the liberation of mind through loving-kindness. If someone develops a wondrous

mind of loving-kindness that can extend equally to the entire world, without any division of directions or intermediate directions, above, below, across, in all ten directions, without being bound anywhere, breaking through all barriers; the Blessed Buddha declares that this mind of loving-kindness, this mind of *mettā-cetovimutti*, surpasses all alms-deeds that the entire world regards as great, subdues them, and stands out far above them. If someone possesses wealth, grains, positions, assets, a healthy body, beauty, and strength, these are regarded as the assets of rebirth. When looking at the meritorious deeds that possess the power to grant these, those alms-giving deeds do not value even a sixteenth part of the liberation of mind through loving-kindness. That is to say, those alms-deeds regarded as great in the world do not value even a sixteenth part of the power of benefit generated by the mind of the person who has developed his mind through loving-kindness. The Blessed Buddha points this out in that manner.

The Blessed Buddha provides three excellent similes regarding this. However many stars there are in the sky, when the moon rises, their radiance is eclipsed and the moon shines bright. Likewise, the Blessed Buddha declared that the liberation of mind through loving-kindness shines and beams, surpassing all those meritorious deeds consisting in giving. He also gives another simile: just as in the autumn the sun rises into the sky, dispelling all the mass of darkness in the entire sky and shining bright, so does the liberation of mind through loving-kindness shine, surpassing all meritorious deeds consisting in giving. Thirdly, he points out—as there is what we call the morning star, the brightest star among those in the sky—here it is shown that, just as the morning star shines in the sky at dawn, so does that sublime meditation called the liberation of mind through loving-kindness shine, surpassing all meritorious deeds that bring about the assets of rebirth. From this we see that we have a gradual progress through the three kinds of merit: giving, virtue, and mental cultivation. We do not remain immersed only in alms-giving. In many people, alms-giving is accompanied by the expectation of receiving worldly and saṃsāric wealth. It is like a trade concept, a commercial concept. In truth, even for one who has become an Arahant, merit is necessary. That is why the Blessed Buddha, in a sermon preached to Princess Sumanā, declared that merit assists humans, merit assists devas, and it also assists the ordained.

Nevertheless, even though we refer to this generally as "merit," we must not think we should remain immersed only in alms-giving deeds. The energy developed through alms-giving must next be directed towards performing meritorious deeds of virtue. Next, the leisure and space obtained through virtue by restraining the body and speech must be utilized for mental cultivation. It is through this that we can deposit that most exquisite wholesome deed—the wholesomeness consisting in mental cultivation—within our mind-stream. It was the benefit of such a wholesome meditative state maintained for seven years that the Blessed Buddha referred to in the previously mentioned sermon: having developed a mind of loving-kindness for seven years, being reborn in the Brahma worlds for seven eons, becoming Sakka thirty-six times, ruling as a wheel-turning monarch for hundreds of other times, and

receiving countless other royal fortunes—all through the power of that mind of loving-kindness.

Accordingly, we see that this thing called merit is not something done for worldly pride visible to the external world, or to stand out in society. It is something connected to our mind-stream. If we, with a good mind, a pure mind, having right view and preceded by faith, perform it before the Triple Gem; or, preceded by compassion, engage in giving alms to the poor, travelers, and beggars, then that merit accumulates in our mind-stream in the most subtle manner. The Blessed Buddha has also declared that these accumulated things do not disappear without yielding results: "I declare that actions performed in this saṃsāra do not wear away without giving their corresponding results." They will yield results in some manner. At the very least, these wholesome deeds we perform help to break the power of evil actions. Therefore, in this way, the pair of words that should always be joined in our minds and in our speech is "merit-demerit" and "wholesome-unwholesome." That is to say, when thinking about any course of action or work to be done, one must think: "Will a merit or a demerit occur through this?" One must think, "Is this wholesome or unwholesome?" That is the primary evaluation. We should not analyze our course of action according to money or worldly convention. According to the Buddha's word, merit is something of eternal value, like a gold coin that does not wear away. We must strive to maintain our thoughts in accordance with that.

These merit-seekers, on the occasion of undertaking the virtue of livelihood-as-the-eighth just now, spoke of livelihood—of a good livelihood. Merit-seekers know that in modern society, various improper paths are pointed out to get rich quickly. To get rich quickly, one can do things like killing animals, raising animals for meat, and various trades in weapons, intoxicants, and poisons. But when such courses of action and such jobs are presented, one must contemplate: is this actually a protection, a security? If our thoughts and aspirations are prepared in accordance with the Dhamma preached by the Blessed Buddha, then some progress can occur in this society that is dangerously plunging into an abyss, because many are searching for shortcuts. But if we prepare our course of action according to those evaluations and values of merit-demerit and wholesome-unwholesome, then it constantly becomes an opportunity to protect one's virtue.

In this virtue, within each and every training rule, there is immense power. As one keeps them more and more, one's mind shapes itself accordingly, with a corresponding set of thoughts. In the instance of abstaining from destroying life, many valuable virtues such as non-violence accumulate in the mind; when abstaining from theft, honesty accumulates. The same applies to other things. When refraining from intoxicants, one develops the capacity to derive the maximum possible benefit from the human mind one has obtained. One also gives safety to the world. In this way, through these training rules, one delivers the world from the troubles that can befall it. Likewise is the meditative mind. In a certain subtle way, those thoughts are

added to this universe. Sometimes, through that thought, even some change occurs in other thoughts. Even if not, it is the power of merit.

The Blessed Buddha has shown that the very result of that merit, of that meritorious intention arising in one's mind, is what helps one in the future to become a Buddha, a Pacceka Buddha, or an Arahant. Therefore, these merit-seekers must bring the example shown in this story, as well as this stanza, close to their lives, and strive to prepare their lives according to the true values revealed to the world by the Blessed Buddha. If one lives with a meritorious mind, a wholesome mind, merit wells up in everyone throughout the day. Not only that, by generating sympathetic joy towards the person performing merit, one can accumulate a vast wholesome merit along with it.

Generating sympathetic joy by looking at the person performing merit—how many people must have rejoiced that that man organized an alms-giving for the Saṅgha headed by the Buddha overnight, even if that treasurer did not? Boundless, infinite beings must have obtained great benefits through the appreciation of that alms-offering. Indeed, our true wisdom, our true skillfulness, must be developed regarding these wholesome qualities. Skillfulness is actually not the skillfulness accepted by worldly convention. As pointed out by the Blessed Buddha, *kusala* means being skillful in diverting one's journey in saṃsāra away from the path of the planes of misery, and treading along the path of happy destinies towards Nibbāna. Thus, we must contemplate utilizing this sermon as well to prepare our life-conduct in accordance with those pairs of words: wholesome-unwholesome and merit-demerit.

Today, this group of merit-seekers established themselves in virtue at their respective levels. They undertook virtue. In the morning, we came to this area to undertake virtue. It appears to have been successful. Many undertook virtue. On this occasion, too, they undertook virtue. Therefore, we must contemplate that it is through such actions that welfare is brought to the world. Welfare is also brought to oneself. Today, for about an hour, we had the opportunity to listen to a Dhamma sermon that is necessary for the qualities of faith, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, which help in stilling our minds, based on a valuable stanza of the Blessed Buddha and its corresponding, exemplary story. We must make an aspiration: May the benefits of listening to this Dhamma also definitely serve as a supportive condition for us to prepare our lives according to the core principles indicated by the matters discussed in this Dhamma sermon, to escape quickly from this highly dangerous saṃsāra, and, having escaped from all saṃsāric suffering including birth, aging, sickness, and death shown to the world by the Blessed Buddha, to be stilled in noble, deathless Nibbāna!

Likewise, may all devas and Brahmas of right view, and our relatives, and whoever from the Avīci hell to the Akaniṭṭha heaven wishes to appreciate merit, appreciate this mass of wholesome merit we have accumulated through this preaching and listening of the Dhamma! Having appreciated it, may they escape from all saṃsāric

suffering as quickly as possible through their aspired Bodhi, and be stilled in noble, deathless Nibbāna! Making this aspiration, recite these stanzas to share the merit.

"*Ettāvatā ca amhehi……*"