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An Investigation of the Motivational Qualities
of the Buddhist Concept of Merit in Thailand

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The central question to be investigated is whether religious motivation can be effectively manipulated to bring about social and economic change in the Thai countryside. Therefore we need to scrutinize the behavioral consequences of the concept of "merit" (punya; bun) which is the operational principle of Thai Buddhism. In religious terms, this concept of "merit" can best be understood against the background of the notion of karma, the Hindu-Buddhist law of cause and effect, that states that every act has some ultimate reward or punishment attached to it, either in this life or in the next.

Our merit is the result of what we do, say and feel. The good that we may do and the reward that we may receive is merit (bun). Evil choices and the punishment they bring us is demerit (baab).¹

In general it can be said that all acts done in accordance with the Buddhist Teaching (Dhamma) result in merit. Merit, therefore, is more than a concept. It is a way of behavior and an abstract good that can be acquired by appropriate action, resulting in a feeling of cultural and psychological well-being.

According to the Monks, ten ways of acquiring merit are recognized, of which the first three (the Great Law) encompass all others. In order of increasing difficulty these three are listed as follows:

1. To give (thaan);
2. To respect the religious rules (sila; sin);
3. To cultivate, to control and to develop the mind; meditation with the purpose of understanding the Dhamma (paawanaa).

The lesser ways are:

4. To have reverence for and to pay respect to elders (principle 2);
5. To help other people (principle 1);
6. To share merit with others (principle 1);
7. To rejoice in the merit of others (principle 2);
8. To pay attention to the Dhamma (principle 3);
9. To spread the Dhamma (principle 1);
10. To strive after the knowledge of good and evil, of the truth (principle 3).

But whatever the learned monks may hold merit to be, we will have to investigate what merit means in plain behavioral terms and to see how merit is understood by the society and the individuals who live with it. To acquire or to make merit (tham bun) is certainly one of the most frequently heard phrases in Thailand. Without doubt, merit and its karmatic consequences constitute a salient element in the Thai cognitive system, to use Spiro's terms. Moreover, there is no doubt that these concepts have been internalized as important elements of the Thai motivational system.² A meritorious life means a gratifying life, whatever the karmatic consequences. Merit is the right behavior, a goal in itself. But the interpretation and the understanding of merit vary widely throughout society.

At the National Level.

At the National level, members of the ranking Sangha (Monkhood),

members of the Government and members of the prestigious Buddhist Association now often interpret merit and merit making behavior as also behavior conducive to nation-building and modernization. Social and humanitarian service is interpreted as morally good and compatible with the Dhamma, and meritorious as such. Thus, it is argued that community development activities, such as the building of schools, wells and roads, make as much merit as the construction of temples, because they bring about progress and call for cooperation.

Certain individuals and groups among the ranking monks are actively engaged in and preparing for social welfare activities, as is clear from the curriculum and the activities carried out under the auspices of Mahachulalongkorn (Buddhist) University.³ Yet this sort of active involvement in the sphere of nation-building is a neologism in Thai Buddhist history, and almost contrary to the traditional and orthodox idea that monks should be far apart from mundane affairs, practicing the holy life and striving for Nirvana, and in that way contributing to the merit and the welfare of society. As an issue it is far from clear. There are discussions and great differences of opinion among the higher Sangha members, among higher civil servants and also within the Buddhist Association.

Almost all the monks that I interviewed -- generally junior, learned, and Bangkok-based Sangha members, but by no means a representative sample -- felt amazed by my interest in their potential social welfare activities, and most were vehement in denying that the monkhood should engage in such activities, with the exceptions of helping to build hospitals and developing education, lay as well as religious. They viewed their roles as religious per se and their task with respect to the laity as religious teachers and specialists. In their view the fostering of the position of Buddhism should

be their central concern. It should furthermore be recognized that most of these junior professional monks had entered the monkhood at a very early age, sometimes as young as eleven, and that their lives were really divorced from the lay world. Yet they are also the people that often rise high in the ranks of the Sangha through their commitment and high degree of learning.

Among the higher civil servants the opinions seem to be divided. Although my own impressions point in the same direction, I will here rely on the unrepresentative findings of Evers, who interviewed 25 higher civil servants about their interpretation of the concept of merit. Some of his findings can be shown as follows:

Re-interpretation of Theravad Buddhist Values⁴

Interview topic: "In what way can a Thai Buddhist acquire merit in modern society?"

	Merit	Merit expressively rejected
5. To participate in development programs (community development, rural develop- ment, social work, etc.)	14	1
6. To help to construct roads and canals	9	4
7. To build factories	-	3

Among members of the prestigious Buddhist Association of Thailand opinions seem to be equally divided and sometimes confused. In one and the same article, Princess Poon, Vice-President of the Association, argues first, that:

They (the monks) are regarded as one of the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha), which we have to respect and to worship every morning and evening. They have personally renounced the detestable world and followed the Buddha's footprint, but they look back towards the worldly affairs on account of their loving kindness and compassion only. He (the monk) should

not lower himself to interfere with us who are lay-people. For, if to do so, he can leave the Order and come to equal our level at any moment.

But a little later she argues, that:

Monks can help much both in the administration and education of the country if they have enough knowledge about the work and sincerely love their country.

She furthermore argues that the active social involvement of the Bhikkhunis (Buddhist nuns) would be desirable and meritorious to themselves and society alike.⁵

At the Village Level.

Whatever ranking people, religious or lay alike, may decide, to the common man in town or in the village merit is a rather tangible item and a practical way of behavior. To make merit may be good in itself, it may be a means to an end, or it may just be part of a social situation, an excuse or a compelling social necessity. While some people may consciously strive to acquire it, to most it is an unquestioned ingredient of life, giving reason to collective expressions and shaping one's relationships to relatives and community. It is a way of behavior, a tradition and a means to achieve a feeling of well-being. In its self-cumulative aspect merit may serve to explain social inequalities, success or hardships.

Next to these general qualities which will be discussed in some detail later, common people in town or village have rather precise ideas about the ways to make merit, but individual motivations to acquire it may vary widely. While many of these motivations can be explained in social terms, a few others should be explained in terms of individual religiosity. The socially

meaningful motivations, which are most conspicuous and most common, will concern us here. It is therefore meaningful to review a few individual cases of merit making behavior and to briefly discuss the collective aspects of merit making in the communal setting.

Nai Sawang is in his late forties, a rather well-to-do employee of a bank (his wife owns a few houses), the oldest son of a middle-class Bangkok family. When his father died he ran into serious financial obligations. As oldest son he had to see to it that his father reached cremation in a way that would be acceptable to his status and to the satisfaction of his relatives and neighbours. That meant heavy expenditure. When somebody dies, merit should be made in his behalf, and a measure of the merit is the lavishness of the appropriate ceremonies. Of course, it is not the oldest son only who has to see to and to pay for these ceremonies. Relatives and neighbours will contribute, and so make merit for themselves and the deceased. But it was Nai Sawang who was personally responsible for appropriate rites and cremation. The seventh, the fiftieth and the hundredth day ceremonies were celebrated with increasing elaboration. Finally, some fifty monks were invited to chant at the neighbourhood wat (temple and monastery compound) and several hundred neighbours and relatives paid their last respects to the deceased while making merit for him by the fact of their presence, their prayer, and their show of respect for the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. After the monks had chanted, they, and later the guests, were treated to an elaborate meal.

By all this, Nai Sawang made merit for his father and for himself, ran into some debts, and affirmed or raised his status in the eyes of his relatives and neighbours. He mildly regretted the expenditure, but could never

it.
have avoided/ He behaved like a good Buddhist, a good son, and also acted under the pressure of an unavoidable situation.

Maha Chettuphon is a professional monk. Still young, at twenty-three he had already spent some twelve years in the monkhood and had achieved the highest degree of Pali-learning. He is of peasant background, but made his way to Bangkok as a bright student. When I met him, he was fostering his knowledge in primarily secular but also religious fields, studying English, and preparing for a teacher's certificate. To him, merit was a clear phenomenon, and he did not doubt that he was acquiring a lot of it. As a monk, his position in society carried the highest possible status. Moreover, as a religious man he was in the most favored position to make merit by simply carrying out his duties and by studying. When he preached, he commented, his audience acquired merit, but he acquired the most. On his early morning rounds he offered the pious an occasion to make merit, as he did when he accepted their gifts. As a consequence his room in the wat was literally packed with detergents, cigarettes, matches, coffee, cloths, books, and a considerable amount of money, most of which he spent on books again.

To him it was clear, as it appears to be clear to the rest of Thai society, that to be a monk is to make merit, and though he doubted the possibility of the transfer of merit to the living or the dead, there was little doubt in his mind that his parents benefitted by the fact that he was a monk.

Maha Chettuphon was not socially unconscious. To give to others, to be good to others, he readily recognized as merit, but he could not see any merit in social involvement of monks other than in preaching, teaching, attending merit making ceremonies, such as cremations, and eventually in

the building of a hospital.

In the evening, Reg works in the market, selling prepared foods. She is a simple woman of Northeastern origin, about twenty-five years old. To her, merit is any form of Buddhist religious behavior. When she comes home from the market, she buys some flowers that she offers to the Buddha (statue) in her home. She lives there with a few other women; she would not dare to live alone for fear of the phi, i.e. the ghosts or spirits. But her Buddha has to return the favors of the flowers: before she goes to work she prays to him and asks for a rather precise business result. Whenever she has saved some money, she invests it in a lottery ticket, and then goes to the temple to offer one baht or two, hoping that the merit she so makes will also bless her chances in the lottery. And a form of merit making she is fond of is to travel to any of the religious fairs in and around Bangkok. There she will first go to the temple, spending her ten baht or so wisely: splitting one baht into twenty five-satang pieces, offering them one by one in the appropriate alms' bowls, then buying flowers, a joss-stick and a candle for one baht, and offering them to any of the officiating monks in return for his blessing, finally buying a one baht's piece of gold-leaf to stick on a Buddha statue. With the rest of the money she will thoroughly enjoy herself at the funfair surrounding the temple. *

Reg is also curious about her future. Therefore she often goes to a neighbourhood temple to donate a few joss sticks or flowers to an older monk who has some local fame in horoscopy. Her future is invariably a blessed one, and again she has the feeling of having killed two birds with one stone. Or three, because she also takes a bottle of lustral water home, which she carefully mixes into her Sjanghai jar where she stores water that

she needs for bathing and cooking.

Unlike Reg, Noi, 35, was more interested in merit for its own sake. Hardworking, she managed to save some money which she spent on her child, who was in the care of her mother (she was widowed). With the little money left she managed to pay for a number of pilgrimages each/^{year} to holy places, like the temple of Phraputtabaat, or Buddha's footprint, near Saraburi, where she made her offerings and went through the physical exercise of climbing the stairs up to the chapel. Back in Bangkok from such occasions she would complain and praise herself for having gone through the hardships that should result in plenty of merit, in her thinking. Furthermore she often went hastily into a temple to donate a small sum as a contribution to her store of merit. She obviously felt well on such occasions, but I got the impression that going to the movies made her feel better still.

Phon, 22, from the North, was not interested in merit. It was a way of saying things. When he heard that his grandmother had died, he felt obliged to go to his native village to make merit for her, he said. But when he arrived up North he had run out of money, and during the ten days that he was there he only visited the temple once when a movie was shown there. While travelling back to Bangkok he did not mention the idea of merit once.

Such was also true for Suthep, 28. He was an eternal student, a spoiled child in a family of too many sisters. Once he had been a novice for two weeks, although not of his own choosing. That was probably also the last time that anybody had seen him in a temple. He had accomplished what was expected. His parents, at least, had made their merit by ordaining a son, and he could not care less. The next time he would be in a temple would be

on the occasion of a cremation or an ordination among his relatives or friends, and his closest contacts with monks would be at the occasion of the opening of an enterprise or the blessing of a home. To him, merit and religion were reduced to polite social form and ritual.

These few city based descriptions of the meaning of merit in personal lives may fairly well indicate the wide range of behavior that may be instigated by merit. A man like Nai Sawang acted under social pressure, and certainly also because of filial piety. But he did not convey the impression that he enjoyed the opportunity to make massive merit. For a simple woman like Peg there was a little bit of religion in every aspect of life. It was an unquestioned way of behavior, giving some cultural and psychological security. The most consciously religious was probably Noi, with the exception of course of Maha Chettuphon, for whom religion was a way of life. For Phon it was a way of expressing a vague consciousness of the ways of his native village that no longer held much reality, while for Suthep merit has become an empty social form, sometimes inescapable as polite behavior.

In the villages much of the merit making ritual takes the form of collective rites. Of course, individual merit making is important, such as the daily food-offerings to monks, but the real occasions to make merit are communal and intercommunal in nature, and tend to coincide with the slack seasons in agriculture. These larger merit making festivals not only offer the opportunity to make and to share in merit, but they also provide the very welcome "counterpoints" in an otherwise dreary, frugal and regular agricultural existence.

Important cremations, like the cremation of a well-known abbot or monk, tend to take place after harvest in the hot and dry season, and are celebrated on a subdistrict wide or larger scale.⁶ Though the host village makes the major contributions and preparations for the event, surrounding villages make their own, so that everybody may share in the merit. Monks from surrounding wats will be present, and the continuous preaching (if possible by loudspeaker) transmits the Dhamma to everyone present. Offerings can be made and blessings received. There will be a plenty of food and competitions, like the shooting of rockets at a target, between the several groups of villagers present.

More communal in nature are the yearly ordination ceremonies when one or a few of the village's young men temporarily enter the monkhood. It is a festive occasion towards which everybody should have the opportunity to contribute, and so to share in the merit.⁷ Most of the merit goes to those relatives, fellow villagers or parents, who make the largest contributions to the event, while the parents acquire extra merit by having a son ordained in the monkhood. It appears that the merit for temporarily entering the monkhood is essentially for the sponsors of the event and the parents, while the young monk basically serves a debt of gratitude towards his parents and goes through a rite-de-passage marking his transition towards adulthood.

Here may be the place to briefly discuss what I have called the self-cumulative aspect of merit. In general, all association with the wat or with the Sangha results in merit. It can also be stated that merit is related to prestige. Ideally, status positions in Thai society are explained in terms of merit. The more meritorious a previous life, the higher the position in this. Social equality as well as social mobility therefore

find an explanation in religious terms. Moreover, the more well-to-do, the higher placed, also have the opportunity to make more merit than others, because a hundred baht makes more merit than one. It is expected that the richer man makes more merit. His ability to engage in big merit making ceremonials, such as large cremations, the sponsoring of an ordination, or the financing of a building of a temple, should also enable his less fortunate fellows to share in the merit by their presence and minor contributions. Of all lay-men therefore, the King is in the most favorable position to make merit, and his subjects are thought to share in the merit he makes. Consequently, at the village level the richer villagers are in the best position to occupy the both prestigious and meritorious positions, by serving on the wat - lay committee or to be appointed wayawatchakorn, or wat lay accountant (monks are not suppose to handle money). To get such an appointment is not only honorable and meritorious, it also shows that one has already acquired considerable merit, while being placed in a position to obtain even more.⁸

Having discussed some of the social patterns and motivations underlying merit making behavior, we shall now investigate what the Thai villagers themselves have indicated as merit making behavior. There appears to be more or less general consensus among the village anthropologists. Two of them have investigated the ranked order of merit making activities. According to Kaufman, who did research in the Central Plain, the most meritorious acts are, in descending order of importance:

1. Becoming a monk.
2. Contributing enough money for the construction of a wat.
3. Having a son ordained as a monk.
4. Making excursions to the Buddhist shrines throughout Thailand.
5. Making contributions toward the repair of a wat.

6. Giving food, daily, to the monks and giving food on holy days.
7. Becoming a novice.
8. Attending the wat on all holy days and obeying the eight laws on these days.
9. Obeying the five precepts at all times.
10. Giving money and clothing to the monks at the Kathin festival.⁹

Tambiah's listing for the Northeast shows some differences in emphasis:

1. Completely financing the building of a wat - this is the act par excellence that brings most merit.
2. Either becoming a monk oneself or having a son become a monk.
3. Contributing money to the repair of a wat or making kathin gifts.
4. Giving food daily to the monks.
5. Observing every wanphra (Buddhist Sunday).
6. Strictly observing the Five Precepts.¹⁰

From these listings three conclusions can be drawn. First, in terms of merit acquired, joining the Sangha is in competition with giving large sums. Second, that throughout, giving receives most emphasis. Third, when only religious duty is involved, the amount of merit received tends to be of minor importance. In Tambiah's terms, such activities have no scarcity value.¹¹

Moreover, there appears to be a shift in emphasis, in the sense that giving is becoming more important at the expense of joining the monkhood or becoming a novice. From 1927 to 1963 the number of wats has increased from 16,502 to 23,322 (41%), but the number of permanent monks only increased from 129,698 to 151,560 (11.7%), while the number of novices has remained fairly constant at approximately 85,000.¹² It seems to be easier to donate toward the construction of a wat than to join and to follow the path of the Buddha. Under influence of increasing modernization and the subsequent decline in functions of the monkhood, the Sangha attracts a decreasing number of young men, and potential novices are no longer dependent on the wat for an education.¹³

The number of young men who temporarily join the monkhood each year has been

fairly constant at 50,000 to 60,000 during the past ten years.¹⁴ In view of the rapidly increasing population this means a decreasing attraction to join temporarily, while the period for which one joins has also been decreasing. Ideally one should stay for the three months of the "Buddhist Lent" (Phansaa), but nowadays two or three weeks, sometimes even a few days, seem to be quite acceptable. It has been reported that King's short stay in the monkhood (two weeks in 1960) has reinforced this tendency.

It has also been observed that the number of faithful flocking to the wat to make merit has been decreasing over the past decade and that the number of deserted wats has been increasing rapidly.¹⁵ Moreover, the people who are most interested in making merit at the wat tend to be women and older people who have retired from active life.

Also, giving as a regular merit making activity seems to be declining. The head of the Department of Religious Affairs reported that "at present the well-being of the monks in Bangkok and Thonburi has been adversely affected in terms of their securing their everyday meals."¹⁶ But this is not true for Bangkok only. Research in certain areas of the Northeast has revealed a lack of interest in the Buddhist church, especially in those areas where the villagers live at a subsistence level and where it sometimes has become economically impossible to pay for the upkeep of a wat and the maintenance of a local Sangha. Wats have thus been deserted and interest in religion has dwindled.¹⁷

There seems to be a general decline in the vitality of Thai Buddhism,¹⁸ and in this process the wat seems to be changing from a religious and social focal point to an exclusively social center of the communities, while merit making has become less personal and more businesslike. The focus is on giving, and it is parochial. To make merit is often motivated in terms

personal betterment: to give lavishly enhances one's status in the community.

It is here that we return to the question that has brought about our interest in the phenomenon of merit as religious motivation, namely whether the manipulation of merit can be effectively used to bring about social and economic development in the Thai countryside.

For the important people in Bangkok it would seem to be easy to agree that merit can be attached to community development activities. Merit can be made by giving and by helping other people, so why would giving to a modern community effort not be meritorious? But many people at the Bangkok level appeared to be uncertain, and quite a few were directly opposed to this suggestion.

To the villager merit appeared to be part of the traditional way of life and of doing things. Wat centered activities make merit, especially contributions towards collective religious ritual and more so towards the building of temples. It is in and by means of the wat that merit can be made. Besides that, not all the people are really interested enough to make merit at every occasion. Traditional religious and collective expression offer an opportunity to acquire all the merit desired, and when one grows old and more interested in consciously building one's store of merit, one is certainly beyond the stage where one builds roads or schools or engages in the digging of wells and latrine-pits, however meritorious such activities may be considered by outsiders.

When feeder roads are built, they will be built, and people will cooperate, because people have recognized their interest in better communication with the outside world. Abbots and monks may help to motivate such

activities because of their positions of leadership, not by declaring such activities as merit making. When in a village in the Northeast latrines were built, it was not for the merit attached to it, but clearly because of the pressure of the district officer who wanted a showpiece. Therefore they were neatly lined along the new feeder road at the entrance of the village. In the same village a well was dug by the monks only. Nobody else was interested enough in a new well, nor in the merit attached to the enterprise. Moreover, the kind of activities that might be construed as meritorious in programs of village development would be of minor importance in terms of merit made: such activities would out of their very nature lack the scarcity value that is attached to the main merit making enterprises.

Moerman has reported an enlightening instance. In the village of Ban Ping (Northern Thailand) the villagers were unwilling to help construct a new school building. Thereupon the district abbot together with the district officer travelled to the village to explain that the building of schools and roads makes a much merit as the construction of temples. However,

Afterward, some villagers admitted that a road might make merit but their explanation was that without one people could lose their way or be attacked by thieves. Some admitted that a school might make merit but their explanation was that only after passing the fourth grade can a boy become ordained. All insisted that nothing makes as much merit as a temple and since a new vihara was then under construction in Ban Ping they could not afford to divert any efforts for the benefit of the school.¹⁹

One further question might still be raised in this context, namely, what are the economic consequences of merit making behavior? Is merit a value conducive or neutral to economic development, or is it an impediment to economic growth? Such a question, raised in the fashion of to-day's

interest in economic progress and its supposed relationship with religious values should be analyzed at the behavioral level if an answer is to make any sense at all.

It has already been concluded above that it is almost senseless to try to motivate actions conducive towards modern ideas of welfare in terms of merit. I have also hinted at the "counterpoint" function of merit making ceremonies in Thai life. Important religious spending more often than not provides the Thai village community with the necessary "breaks" in an otherwise dull and hard existence. Man does not live by bread alone, and as such, such spending is a necessity in order to keep going. The villages, where organized religion has disappeared for reasons of poverty, are socially and physically in a deplorable shape indeed. Men need the little luxury of some display spending in order to lead any kind of satisfying life. The question is, therefore, what remains after the initial expenditure on merit making.

Thai peasants, like anybody else in this world, are fascinated by some material comforts, a better dress, a better meal or a transistor radio. But to many of them it is simply not a realistic possibility. For them, merit making, religious spending, is a much sounder and much more profitable investment than ordinary economic saving. It means investment in a next life in which their merit will be paid off by a more desirable social position, where they will be free from the toil and the poverty of the present existence. And sometimes it may already be an investment in this life.

It is here that the self-cumulative aspect of merit starts to operate. It is traditionally believed that the size of a farmer's harvest is a function of his merit. Wealth, therefore, is a sign of merit made, and a

possibility to acquire more. The wealthy are in a better position to make merit, also because ten baht make more merit than one.²⁰ A wealthy man has options, and he will invest in merit and in economic opportunity. He needs not spend the total of his riches in merit making display. He will spend some on merit, he may even become a temple builder, but to achieve that aim he must show common sense in his economic behavior. His expenditure for merit making purposes will be a result of his economically sensible manipulations. If Nai Sawang ran into debts, it was an entirely temporary affair. He would not eat less, he would not suffer more. He had enhanced his prestige in this life and bettered his chances for the next, but the amount he spent was basically a surplus and the result of saving and investment in property that would soon repay him, and for that matter he did not need to wait until the next life.

Following this reasoning, I would like to observe that, while merit making does not contribute to economic saving and investment of the poor and the less well-to-do, it does so in the case of the economically more powerful, whose savings and investments are most important anyway. The question that is more crucial is whether they will invest in opportunities that will enhance per capita production, and that has very little to do with Buddhism or merit.

On the whole it would seem that the economy of merit making provides Thai society with a model that stresses the usefulness of saving, investing, and achievement, merit therefore becoming, if anything, a value that is potentially conducive to economic growth.²¹