

The Benefits of the Existence of Statues and of Making Statues

By Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Having faith in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, we have the opportunity to accumulate inconceivable merit, to create the cause of enlightenment for oneself and for other sentient beings equaling the infinite sky, by making holy objects and by making offerings to these holy objects.

Success in life generally depends on how much merit a person has accumulated, as does success in particular practices such as the Six Yogas of Naropa in order to achieve the ultimate happiness of liberation and enlightenment, especially enlightenment. The whole of one's success depends on how much merit one has accumulated. The whole question concerns merit, how much merit one has accumulated. To actualize bodhicitta, emptiness, tantra, or even the fundamental realizations of the lam-rim path, you have to be very fortunate, which means you have to have accumulated a lot of merit in the past. So it is wise to attempt to create the cause for success as much as possible in our everyday life.

Manjushri asked Buddha, "One Gone Beyond, now you are the only object to whom sentient beings can make offering. After you pass into the sorrow-less state, what will sentient beings do? How will they accumulate merit when they can't see Buddha any more? Please advise us."

Buddha answered, "My four followers, there is not one single difference between making offerings to me now and in the future, with devotion, making offerings to my reflections. The merit is equal and the result is equal."

The "four followers" refers specifically to the fully ordained monks, the fully ordained nuns, the getsuls and the getsulmas, the disciples closest to Buddha, but generally it includes all of us sentient beings who do not have the karma to see the actual living Buddha. We have only the karma to see Buddha's reflections: the symbolic representations of Buddha, such as statues, paintings and so forth.

Buddha is saying that even though we cannot see the actual Buddha, if we make offerings to these holy objects symbolic of Buddha, the merit is equal to that of actually seeing Buddha and making offerings. It is not that the merit of those who met Shakyamuni Buddha in ancient times and were able to make offerings to him is not more than that of offering merely to a statue of Buddha. The result is exactly the same. This is very important to understand and very important to remember in our daily life. When we offer our food and drink, when we make offerings on the altar, whenever we do the practice of offering in our everyday life, we should feel great happiness.

Then Buddha said, "This is due to the blessings of Buddha. This is the reality but ordinary beings whose minds are undeveloped cannot see these benefits."

"This is due to the blessings of Buddha" means that making offerings to statues has the same result due to the power of the holy object. Further reasons as to how the benefits of making offerings to Buddha and the statues of Buddha are the same are mentioned in the Guhyasamaja root text.

Then it says, "A stupa is a palace where all the Buddhas are abiding." So this is the same with a monastery. The benefits exist as long as the monastery exists. And also the benefits you receive equal the number of atoms of the stupa or monastery. You do not necessarily have to build a monastery. Building even one shrine room—a place where Buddha abides, where holy objects of Buddha abide—has many benefits. It's important to understand these benefits of the holy objects, the various opportunities we have to create the cause of happiness by accumulating extensive merit with these holy objects.

The text says, "Those sentient beings who do not have the fortune actually to meet the Buddha need the holy objects of body, speech and mind as the field in which to accumulate merit. These holy objects are necessary."

The existence of Buddha's teachings for a long time depends on the existence of the holy objects of Buddha. The teachings exist in the mind so how can they depend for their existence on the existence of these external holy objects? You have to think about this, you have to understand this. It is not easy to have the teachings in the mind. To have the scriptural understanding and the realizations of the teachings is not easy. For these, you need to have a lot of merit. The most powerful merit one can accumulate, and accumulate so easily, is in relation to holy objects of Buddha. By making statues of Buddha and making offerings to statues of Buddha, one accumulates infinite, inconceivable merit that immediately becomes a cause of enlightenment. Every merit accumulated by making statues and by making offerings to statues immediately becomes the cause of enlightenment. Without doubt, every single one becomes a cause of enlightenment.

By accumulating such infinite merit in this way, one is able to develop the mind, one is able to understand the teachings, one is able not only to attempt the practices of listening to, reflecting and meditating on the teachings, but to complete them. All this has to come from merit. So you can see how the existence of the teachings for a long time depends on the existence of the holy objects. The existence and flourishing of the teachings depend on the existence of the holy objects.

Buddhism has started in the West only recently. Because one sees the problems of life, there is much desire for mind-peace, and this longing leads to much interest in meditation. This is common among Westerners. But because Buddhism has just started in the West there is not so much regard for holy objects. In countries where Buddhism is established, especially Mahayana Buddhist countries such as Tibet and Nepal, much effort is put into creating many conditions for oneself and others to accumulate merit actualizing holy objects, in those countries everybody, whether great yogis, Sangha or lay practitioners, puts effort into this way of accumulating merit for the self and so many other sentient beings. Other sentient beings also accumulate merit by making offerings to or circumambulating these holy objects.

This is why these countries have so many holy objects: so many monasteries, so many stupas, so many statues. For example, sight-seeing in Tibet is only a cause to purify and to accumulate merit because wherever you go you see only holy objects: statues, scriptures, yogis' caves.

Gradually, as you understand lam-rim and especially the practice of Jorcho more and more, the more you see the importance of holy objects, not only for your own happiness but for the

many benefits they bring to so many other sentient beings. With these holy objects, they create the cause of success and happiness. Because these holy objects exist, sentient beings make offerings to them, pray to them. This helps them to create the cause of happiness, and this is how they experience happiness up to the highest happiness of enlightenment. Because the temporary and ultimate happiness of yourself and others depends on the existence of holy objects, there is a purpose in making them.