

Freedom & Security

February 21, 2009

In the past several months, teaching in different places, I've been giving talks on wealth, noble wealth. When I'd start the talk, I'd simply say "I'd like to talk about wealth tonight," and nervous laughter would go around the room. That's the topic that seems to be on everyone's mind right now: how their wealth is disappearing. The purpose of giving the talk was to remind people they do have other forms of wealth that have nothing to do with the monetary economy. And it turns out these other forms are the most important ones. They're the wealth that comes from the mind.

There's a passage in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says, "Contentment is the foremost wealth, the highest wealth." Learning to have a sense of enough frees you in so many ways. You don't get into debt, and you learn to focus your energies in areas where the Buddha says you can't rest content until you've developed some good qualities in the mind. These qualities are also a form of wealth.

You can think about wealth in the external sense. What do we like about it? It gives us security and it gives us freedom: That's what we want from it. It's kind of paradoxical: We like being secure, but we also like being free. But it is possible to develop qualities in the mind to provide both security and freedom at the same time.

That speaks to a deep need in our nature for what happiness means. They've done studies about different places that are pleasant to stay, and one study had to do with figuring out where human beings first developed and how it relates to what kind of landscape we feel most comfortable in. Whether it has anything to do with where we first developed, it turns out we do feel most comfortable is living at the edge of a forest, with a wide open view to a meadow. We like the sense of enclosure and safety that we get from the forest, but we don't want to be totally enclosed. We'd like to have some open spaces as well. That's a metaphor for what wealth does for us. It provides us with some security but also gives us a home base from which we have range to move about. The greater our wealth, the greater our freedom, and more opportunities are open to us.

But external wealth is really good only to the extent that it can allow us to have opportunities to develop this internal wealth. We won't need that much external wealth to survive. That's why we have contemplation of the requisites every evening: to remind us why we need food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, and

exactly how much we really need, realizing that beyond that is superfluous. And in many cases it's excess baggage that weighs us down. But when we have enough in terms of outside wealth, we can start looking at our inside needs.

There is a passage in the Canon where Ugga, who's a king's minister, comes to see the Buddha and he talks about a millionaire—apparently Visakha's father, whose name is Migara Rohaneyya—saying that it's amazing how wealthy this man is: He's got 100,000 pieces of gold, to say nothing of his silver. And the Buddha says, "I don't deny that that's wealth. But that kind of wealth is subject to fire, floods, thieves, kings, and hateful heirs. There's another kind of wealth, though, which is not"—the wealth that comes from within the mind. And he gives a list of seven qualities. The number seven is significant because that was the number for treasure in the Buddha's time. There were seven kinds of jewels, which were considered to be seven treasures, and there are seven forms of internal wealth.

So this is the Buddha's investment strategy or investment program. As you practice, you're investing your time and energy in developing these qualities. As with any investment program, there has to be trust. That's why the first form of wealth is conviction: conviction in the Buddha's awakening. What that means is that you believe it is possible through human effort to come to an end of suffering. You also believe that the qualities of the Buddha used in order to do that are available to all of us. We have those qualities in potential form in our minds. Heedfulness, resolution, ardency: These are all qualities we can develop.

This conviction is a form of wealth in that it encourages us to explore the potentials of our actions. If we didn't believe that human action could do this, we would probably limit our hopes to what's being advertised in newspapers, advertised on TV, advertised on the Internet, trying to make ourselves happy with what the consumer industries provide for us. But that limits us, and it certainly doesn't make us secure. You buy something and it falls apart. You amass your money and it just disappears. But if you have conviction that your actions matter, and they will make a difference, then you've got lots of potential here. You're acting and intending all the time, so you have the opportunity to develop something skillful in your mind all the time. That's all to the good. As you act on this conviction, you discover more potentials, more abilities within yourself than you thought you had. You've got this huge field that you can plant full of all kinds of good seeds.

The next three of the qualities basically protect you against planting bad seeds in the field: virtue, a sense of shame, and a sense of compunction. Virtue is when you take your actions seriously and decide that you don't want to harm anybody. For example, with your speech, you're very careful to say only what's true, what's

beneficial, and what's timely. When you give more value to your words this way, other people will value them as well. If you treat your own words as unimportant, words that are just thrown away, other people will treat them as throwaway words, too. So you've got to give value to your actions and make sure you're very careful not to cause harm.

Shame and compunction help in this. Shame is when you'd be ashamed to do something that's harmful. Compunction is a sense of fear: You don't want to do anything harmful because you're afraid of the bad results that will come. Shame here is not an unhealthy shame where you think you're a bad person. Healthy shame actually comes with self-esteem. You're above that kind of action. It's not worthy of you. This is the kind of shame that goes together with a healthy pride, taking pride in the fact that you're willing to learn from your mistakes, that you have the honesty to admit a mistake and to learn from it.

All these things together—virtue, shame, and compunction—are a form of wealth in that they protect you from having to look back on unskillful actions, the sense of remorse and regret that can come when you realize you've done something really, really harmful, really, really stupid. Those actions, once they've been done, can't be taken back. No matter how much money you could spend, you can't take back the things you've done.

I heard a recording one time of a radio show where a guy called in. He had been a soldier back in Vietnam, 40 years ago. And an image of a little girl that he had killed during the war kept haunting him, night after night. He could never get any sleep. He said that if he had a million dollars, he'd be willing to pay it to go back and undo that deed. But of course no amount of money could do that, and no amount could get that image out of his mind. You could tell from his voice that he was really tormented. That's an extreme example, but we have lots of these things in our lives, the mistakes we've made in the past. We look back and we don't like to think of them. They're like a scar, a wound in the mind.

So having a sense of shame and compunction about doing unskillful things, keeps us from creating those sorts of wounds. That's a huge protection. They provide you a lot of security. They underlie the virtue of the precepts, where you make yourself a promise that you're just not going to touch certain forms of unskillful behavior. That's wealth. Because when you're free from regret, it's freedom and security together. It's a genuine wealth inside.

The remaining three treasures are more positive: having listened to a lot of Dhamma, generosity, discernment. These are the three positive treasures. "Listening" here means not only listening but also, when you hear something really good, trying to memorize it. Then you think about it, analyze it, try to come

to an understanding of what it means and how it applies to your life. This is a treasure in that you need a set of values to protect yourself from the ordinary everyday values of everyday society, where they seem to believe that your highest duty is to be a consumer, to keep the economy going, and your life should be devoted to producing and consuming material things. You need protection against that. This is what the Dhamma provides.

This way, the melodies going through your head are not commercial jingles. They're words of the Dhamma, to remind you of what's true and has been true for more than 2,500 years. These are true principles that hold across time: that you have a higher capability in life, which frees you from the traditions and values of ordinary everyday culture. Think of Ajaan Mun, when he was criticized for going out in the forest, eating only one meal, eating out of a bowl, and was told, "Nobody else does this, why are you doing this? Why aren't you following good Thai and Laotian customs?" His response was, "Those are the customs of people with defilements." And he didn't mean just the culture of those two countries. He meant every secular culture. Every country's culture is a culture of defilement. He said he wanted to join the noble ones, so he had to live by the customs of the noble ones, the values of the noble ones.

So you have to keep reminding yourself of what those values are, which is why it's good to have listened to a lot of Dhamma. It protects you from doing unskillful things, and it provides you with the freedom of an enlarged sense of your own capabilities.

I remember the year after Ajaan Fuang passed away: It was a very difficult year in the monastery. Things were pretty unsettled. What kept me going was remembering things Ajaan Fuang had said, that suddenly became extremely applicable. They were things I could really hold on to in the face of conflict within the monastery. That was a form of wealth that he had left behind.

Generosity is also a form of wealth, which means that giving away is a form of wealth. That's the paradox of generosity. It frees you in the sense that you're not tied down by your stinginess. It provides you with security when you know that there are people who love you, who respect you for being generous. And inside yourself, you have a much more spacious mind. It's not so narrow and constricted, constantly worried about not having enough of this, not having enough of that. You learn to silence those voices. You say, "Look, I've got enough to share."

The first time you gave a gift of your own free will was one of the first times in your life when you realized that you have free will; you can make choices. I remember when I was a kid, I had an allowance. One day I was in a supermarket and I saw an egg separator. I'd never seen anything like this in my life before. I

remember as a smaller child watching my mother baking cakes and having to separate eggs. She basically split the shell in half and would move the yoke back-and-forth, back-and-forth, back-and-forth until she'd got the white out. I thought an egg separator would be really nice for her. So I used my allowance money to buy her an egg separator. As far as I can remember, that was the first totally voluntary gift I had even given and I still remember it more than any other gift I've given, and also more than any of the gifts I've ever received. And it's because of that sense of freedom: You realize you have the freedom to choose and to make a difference in someone else's life. So again, it's wealth in the sense that it gives both freedom and a sense of security.

The same holds true with discernment. This gives you even greater freedom. You learn to see for yourself many of the things that you originally take on conviction: that have freedom of choice, that qualities in mind really matter, and that the suffering that weighs on you is not totally beyond your control, you have the choice to put an end to that kind of suffering because it comes from your own actions.

This discernment grows out of some very simple principles, one of which being, as the Buddha said, knowing that what's your business and what's not your business is a sign of a wise person. There's a lot of the stress and suffering in the world out there, the stress of things that change, but think of Ajaan Suwat's image of the weight of that mountain over there on the horizon: Is it heavy? Well, it's heavy on you only if you try to pick it up. In other words, events in and of themselves may be stressful, but they're going to weigh on your mind only if you pull them in. It's the pulling in that weighs down your mind.

So even through there is change, it doesn't have to weigh you down. In those three perceptions the Buddha has us develop with regard to phenomena— inconstancy, stress, not-self: The stress there is the stress that you have no control over. But the stress in the four noble truths is something you *do* have control of. You're the one who chooses to create it. And you can also choose not to. You can develop the path to put an end to it, you can develop qualities in the mind that allow you let that kind of craving and ignorance go.

As the Buddha said, insight means insight into arising and passing away, leading to the right ending of stress, looking at things as they happen in your mind. One of the keys to the Buddhist teachings on discernment and wisdom is that you're not trying to look for realities beyond what's immediately apparent. You want to look very carefully at what's immediately apparent. It's right here in front of your eyes. It's the wisdom of the little kid in the story about the emperor with no clothing. He was honest enough to see. He didn't care what people

thought, that you had to be a wise person to see the emperor's clothing. He looked at it and said, "There's no clothing." It's that kind of insight. It's that kind of insight, looking very carefully into what's arising and passing in your mind. That enables you to see, when stress comes and goes, what comes along with it, and what goes along with it—and what you can do to let go of the cause, to reach the point where the stress that arises and passes away in the mind doesn't have to come any more. That's when the mind is totally secure. It's reached a security that's based on no conditions at all. It's totally unconditioned. And it's a freedom that's totally unconditioned as well. That's the ultimate wealth inside.

So in the midst of all the ups and downs of outside wealth, it's good to remind ourselves that genuine wealth is a quality the mind. It starts with contentment with external things and moves on from there. This means that it's in the mind where you find the best place to invest. The more time you invest in training the mind, the more energy you invest in training the mind, then the greater the rewards. We're sometimes told that you should meditate without any idea of gaining, or that trying to get something out of the practice is spiritual materialism. Those teachings are good for people who want the results to come too fast. They want the results without having done the effort. They practice because they want praise.

Over the long term, though, you do need to have a sense that the time you're investing in the practice is time well spent, and it definitely does give rewards. That's what it's all about. If this path didn't lead to rewards, the Buddha wouldn't have bothered to teach it. But he did teach it, and it does give the promised results. Having conviction in that fact is the initial form of wealth for the mind, the kind of wealth the Buddha said fire can't burn, water can't wash it away, thieves can't steal it, kings and hateful heirs can't make off with it. It's totally secure, totally free.