

Gifts of Noble Wealth

December 7, 2014

It's that time of year again, when shopkeepers are trying to get us to buy gifts for other people, with the emphasis on the *buying*. It makes people forget that the best gifts you can give are gifts of the spirit, gifts of the heart. Those are things you don't give any particular season of the year. They're meant to be given all the time.

The gift of forgiveness, the gift of your knowledge, the gift of fairness, justice: The fact that we can give these gifts reminds us that we have a certain wealth in our hearts. We have more to share, more than we need, so that we *can* share—if we keep our mental energy up, if we keep our heart energy up.

This is why the Buddha talked about what he calls the wealth of the noble ones, noble wealth, which people who are not yet noble ones can also develop. One of the things we're doing right now is developing the strength inside that will enable us to keep churning out all those gifts we want to give to other people in terms of our time, our energy, our concern, our love, our compassion. It's good to think about the things we can do that strengthen these qualities, that make us wealthy inside.

The first is conviction. It starts out with conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that he really did know what he was talking about. It really was through his own efforts that he found an awakening that's valid for everybody, everywhere, at all times.

This past week I was reading some comments from people who were saying that "Well, you know, the Buddha didn't really appreciate sensual pleasure because, after all, he had gone through all those austerities and it kind of warped his mind"—implying that he didn't really know what he was talking about. If you have that kind of attitude, then what are you going to take as an object of your conviction, aside from your own opinions?

The Buddha's awakening has meaning for us in the sense that it was through his own efforts that he was able to achieve a happiness beyond conditions. In other words, there were causes in the path that enabled him to find something that was uncaused. The qualities that he developed along the path are qualities we all have in greater or lesser measure already. They weren't superhuman qualities. It's just that he took them and developed them all the way. Which means that we can do that, too.

Again, it's a matter of our own efforts. The path starts with generosity and goes through virtue and on into developing good qualities through meditation. If you think about these types of noble wealth as forms of investment, this is your starting capital. In any kind of investment, you have to make the decision,

“I’m going to put aside something now that I can trust will pay back in the future.” You want to be convinced that the investment will pay off.

You often hear that this is called spiritual materialism, and that you have to outgrow this by dropping all idea of gaining anything. But this is where we all have to start. Without conviction in our own actions, we’re just going to keep looking for whatever pleasure we can find right now. In fact, that was exactly the consequence for people in the Buddha’s time who denied the principle of action, that your actions had any impact on anything. They tended to go toward hedonism. You take whatever pleasure you can find right now, right now, because you don’t know when you’re going to die, so why give up a pleasure in the hand for something that promised down the road: That was their attitude.

But if you’re convinced in the principle of action—that your actions do have consequences and they go really far down the line—then you’ll be a lot more careful about what you’re going to do. You’ll be willing to make sacrifices, to make the effort to develop these good qualities of mind.

So conviction is what you have to start with: It’s the principle of trust—trust in the Buddha, trust in your own ability to follow his example. That way, when you focus your efforts here on your own mind, you’re focusing them on the right place. You’re not going to regret it.

Built on that conviction comes a cluster of three qualities: virtue, shame, and compunction. Virtue means holding to the precepts. Sometimes you hear that holding to the precepts is a fetter. There is the word *silabbata-paramasa*, which means grasping at *sila* and *vata*. *Vata* means practices. *Sila* here can mean virtue or precept, or it can also mean habit in general, which is its most likely meaning in this context. It would be strange that if people held to virtuous habits it would be a fetter, but if they held to bad habits it wouldn’t be a fetter. The fetter lies in holding to any habit as an end in itself—thinking that if you obey the rules, or if your habit proves that you’re a free spirit by breaking the rules, that that’s going to be enough.

For the Buddha, the precepts are a *means* for the higher stages of training the mind. They help you develop more alertness, more mindfulness, getting you to reflect on your actions and their consequences. And to learn some restraint, because if you don’t have restraint, mindfulness, and alertness, then you’re never going to be able to get anywhere in your meditation.

So using the precepts is not a fetter. In fact, it’s the way beyond fetters. You find that all the training rules have their impact on the mind. The monks have more precepts than the laypeople because, as a group, they have to depend on the support of laypeople and the confidence of laypeople. We have to make sure that one monk doesn’t try to garner all the support for himself, taking it away from others. So there are rules that govern the relationship between the

monks and the laypeople, and between the monks and the monks. Those are all parts of the training, too. As the Buddha said, these are all means for cleansing away the defilements of the mind. The right attitude lies in using precepts as a tool, rather than seeing them as an end in and of themselves. In that way, they're not a fetter.

When you have the virtue that comes from training in the precepts, it's a form of wealth. You're refraining from doing the kinds of things you'd like to do just because you feel like doing them. You start thinking about the consequences, which helps you to avoid bad consequences—and that's an important form of wealth.

Virtue here is supplemented by shame and compunction. Shame does not mean being ashamed of yourself as a bad person. It means being ashamed of certain actions, seeing that they're beneath you, that you don't want to stoop to them. It's the reverse side of healthy pride. Compunction is thinking about the consequences of the actions down the line, realizing that you want to avoid anything that's going to cause harm.

All these qualities acting together are priceless. Lapses in the precepts, when you realize that you really caused harm, stick in the memory and stab you in the heart. I've been reading about the veterans of wars who find themselves at night thinking about the people they killed. One guy said, "I'd give a million dollars in order to wipe out those memories or to go back and not have done that." Of course, no amount of money can do that. If you avoid making that mistake to begin with, though, you don't need to have those memories, you don't have to be burdened by them, wishing you were able to go back. That ability to refrain from evil is, as I said, priceless, worth more than a million dollars, because you don't have to suffer the regret that would eat away at the heart.

So these qualities are a form of wealth. It's good to appreciate them, seeing that they *are* wealth in the mind. If you don't appreciate them, they won't develop on their own, and you won't know what wealth you're missing out on.

The other three qualities are learning, generosity, and discernment. Learning here is learning about the Dhamma, having knowledge of the Dhamma to fall back on. The first year after Ajaan Fuang passed away, there was a lot of jockeying for power in the monastery, and a lot of strange things happening: people coming in from outside trying to take over. I had to deal with all kinds of difficulties. It was during that period when different things that Ajaan Fuang had said while I was with him would suddenly come to mind. That was my guidance, my support. That's what saw me through that year and the ensuing years. In fact, that was the beginning of the book *Awareness Itself*. I realized I didn't want to forget these things. These were principles that helped see me through the difficulties of those times. They were

a form of wealth that Ajaan Fuang had given to me as an inheritance

So it's good to read the Dhamma, to listen to the Dhamma, to memorize the Dhamma. Have that as your wealth, something to remind you of what's right and what's wrong as you go through life and get tempted to do something you shouldn't do, or you don't feel strong enough to do something you should. Those words are words of encouragement, words that help you get your priorities straight. Because this is an important part of the Dhamma teaching: helping you to see clearly what really is important.

As with the four noble truths: They're not just casual truths, four nice things that are interesting to know about suffering among all the other things you can know. The Buddha's basically saying that these are *the* most important issues that you need to focus on: the questions of what you're doing to cause suffering and what you can do to put an end to it. If you give priority to these issues, everything falls into place.

So learning is a form of wealth. It gives you the guidance you need when your own discernment isn't up to firing shots in rapid succession, piercing great masses, and shooting long distances—in other words, when it's not quick enough, when it can't see further enough down the line, and when it can't break through this great mass of ignorance in your mind. The learning you've got can help you in that direction.

Generosity is a quality of mind that makes your own mind spacious. If you're able to give something, give it. If you don't have enough in terms of material things, you can give your time, you can give your knowledge, you can give help to other people. You can give your energy. You can give fairness. They talk about the gift of Dhamma, which can mean teaching other people the Dhamma as you can, being a good example in the Dhamma, but it can also mean being fair, showing justice to other people. These are really important gifts, much more important than anything material you might be able to give somebody. They go deeper into the heart.

But generosity is not something you just every once in a while. It's something to try to do all year around. When you give things like this, you begin to realize that your heart is broad. It's very roomy. It's a good place to live. If you're living in a very narrow heart that doesn't want to help anybody—that's afraid that if you give this away, you're going to lack it down the line—that's like living in a tiny, tiny little room: You hardly have any room to move at all, or even to breathe. But when you're generous, as Ajaan Lee says, the sky is your roof, the ground is your floor, every house is your home. In other words, the world is your place because you've been helping the world. And there's a lot of room in that mind.

Then finally, discernment: This is when you learn to go beyond just the wisdom you've learned from other people and heard from other people, and

you start producing your own wisdom, your own insights as you need them. I made reference just now to the three skills of the archer that the Buddha used to compare with discernment. To fire shots in rapid succession: In other words, you're quick. You see something and you can see right through it, particularly issues in your own mind. You shoot great distances: In other words, you see that if you do this or that, there are going to be the consequences that will follow down the line. You pierce great masses: That's the mass of ignorance.

This is a quality that's genuine wealth because, as Ajaan Lee says, if you have discernment then all you need is a machete and you can set yourself up in business wherever you happen to be. In other words, you don't need many tools. In Thailand, your basic tool is your machete. If you have discernment, you can use even simple tools to accomplish all kinds of things.

You learn to use your ingenuity, your own powers of observation. Look at what Ajaan Lee did with the breath. The texts give just a few basic ideas, and yet he was able to run with them and develop a very detailed course for how you work with the breath energy in the body, how you make it a really good place to be, how you could get the mind in concentration just by the way you focus on your breath.

Of course, he had the example of the Buddha before him. The Buddha used the breath, something we all have. Everybody breathes in, breathes out all the time. It's not as if the Buddha had to go searching up through the Himalaya mountains for some rare root or something for his awakening. He simply focused on something that was right there all the time. But because of his discernment, he was able to make a lot out of it. That's the wealth of discernment. You don't need a lot of resources but you can take what you've got and turn it into wealth.

So these are forms of inner wealth that strengthen the mind, so that you can be a more giving person in your dealings with other people—an openhanded person, as the Buddha says. This kind of wealth, when you share it, really is a gift. It's a gift that comes from the heart and goes to the heart. So invest as much time and energy into developing this kind of wealth, and you're not going to regret it.