

Noble Treasures

August 12, 2015

The mind has a very deep habit, a little question inside that keeps getting asked over and over again: “What are we doing next? What are we doing next?” If you come up with a lot of different answers, the mind gets scattered and feels fearful. So, for the next hour, try to convince yourself that there’s only one thing you really have to do, which is to stay with the breath. Then work with the breath. Explore the breath energies in your body. Notice where you can feel the in-breath, where you feel the out-breath, and what you can do to breathe in a way that’s more comfortable. In doing that, try not to put too much pressure on the breath to change it. Often the best way to change it is to simply think of the breath doing different things from what it’s normally doing. You’ll see that the power of the mind, the power of that perception, can actually change the way you breathe.

So think of the body as a big sponge, something wide open with pores on all sides, so that the breath energy can come in and out from any direction. As you hold that perception in mind, see how the body responds. Then, as the question comes up again, “What next?” what next is the same thing again and again and again. If you stick with it long enough, you’ll find that you can get deeper and deeper into concentration.

It requires some intelligence. You can’t just say, “Well, just stay with the breath and force it down.” You have to use your ingenuity. You have to use your powers of observation to notice what kind of breathing you like, what kinds of changes in the breath you’ll find interesting, and how you can explore the body and different parts of the body so that you can get to know the parts of the body that you may have been ignoring and see how you can nourish them. See how they reward you as they get nourished. All this comes under that one heading, “What next?” “Stay with the breath.”

Of course, the mind has other agendas as well. It’ll tell itself, “This is just a diversion,” or “This is not all that important. I’ve got other things I’ve got to think about now.” Here again, you have to use your discernment—especially with the part of the mind that tends to worry about the future. You’ve got to remind yourself that the best way to prepare for the future is to develop your mind. After all, what is the worst thing that could happen in the future? Most of us will say, well, you die—and that the worst death would be one that was long, drawn out, and painful.

But, the Buddha says, there are things that are worse than death. You do unskillful things; hold to wrong views. That can lead to pain and suffering beyond death, and it can last for many lifetimes. What are your best protections against doing unskillful things? There's a list of qualities that the Buddha calls the seven noble treasures, qualities of mind that you develop, that you can really depend on in the future—that will protect you from doing the things that would cause harm to yourself and harm to others, and that will encourage you to do things that will have long-term benefits.

You develop these qualities in the same way that traders on Wall Street have their what they call their *nut*, like a squirrel, because they know the system is very fragile. It could collapse at any time. They figure there must be some way to put their money into something that doesn't depend on the fragility of the system. Of course, money is never really safe, though. There's a great passage in the Canon talking about how you might bury a treasure 'way underground, but it could get destroyed by water. It could get destroyed by underground animals. Someone else might dig it up. One of my favorite lines is that nagas might take it away. So even your nut, if that's the kind of nut it is, is not going to be all that safe.

But the qualities of your mind are safe. Nobody else even has to know about them. And they're really yours. They really do protect you against *the* big danger in life, i.e., wrong views and wrong actions.

Four of the elements in this list relate directly to action. First there's conviction. Traditionally, this means conviction in the Buddha's awakening, and that translates into the principle that he gained awakening through his own efforts. He really did find the deathless happiness, and the qualities he had to develop in the course of perfecting his skills and using his own efforts were qualities that we all have in potential form. He took those potentials and developed them. That means that we can develop our potentials, too. That's one of the implications of his awakening.

The other implication, of course, relates to his insight into karma in the course of the awakening—that there really is a continuity from one life to the next, and it's through your actions. You can't say, "Well, I was born in America this lifetime and I want to be born in America the next lifetime." That's not for sure. You can't necessarily keep the same gender. You can't necessarily keep the same background. You certainly can't keep your possessions. When you die, it's like a trap door opening beneath you. All the things you depended on, around which you build your identity here: They go. What's going to receive you under the trap door? The actions you've done.

This leads directly to the next three qualities: virtue, shame, and compunction. Virtue, of course, is a matter of the precepts. You make up your mind you're not going to harm anybody under any circumstances, with the emphasis on the *any*. You could think about what could happen, say, if civilization collapses. You read stories about people in war and some of the horrible things they suddenly find themselves doing because they feel the push of poverty, the push of hunger, make them do things that they would never do under ordinary circumstances. You have to ask yourself, "Are you immune to those kinds of pressures?"

That's one of the reasons why the precepts are kept simple: No killing. No stealing. They don't have a lot of exemptions. They don't have a lot of explanations—just quick, easy to remember: No, no, no. No killing; no stealing; no illicit sex; no lying; no intoxicants. You keep those in mind and you look at yourself in the course of an ordinary life. Do you have trouble keeping the precepts? If that's the case, what are you going to do when things get really tough? You've got to develop the qualities of mind that will help toughen your precepts and make you more reliable, because this is probably the biggest thing to be worried about, the biggest fear we should have about future: that we can't depend on ourselves to be virtuous in all situations.

One of the ways of developing a more dependable attitude is to develop the next two qualities— i.e., a sense of shame and a sense of compunction. Shame here is not the debilitating shame that psychiatrists are making all their money off of. It's a healthy shame that comes from your own self-esteem. You're a good person, an honorable person. Certain kinds of behavior are beneath you, and you'd be ashamed to do them. In other words, shame is not saying you're a bad person. It's actually saying you're a good person, so you should have a sense of shame around doing things that would go against genuine self-esteem. This is a good protection.

The next one, compunction, is a word we don't use much, and it's sad that we don't use it much. The British meaning is that you feel guilty about something after having done it. Here, though, we're talking about the American meaning, which is that when you think about doing something unskillful in the future, you tell yourself, "No, I just wouldn't feel right doing that." You'd be afraid of the consequences.

You might say it's the opposite of apathy. It's a sense of having some moral scruples. This kind of fear is one that the Buddha actually encourages—the fear of doing something unskillful. There are a lot of other fears. We were talking today about the sutta on the fears of animals in the jungle. Right here, we've got snakes. We've got bobcats. Bobcats aren't all that scary, but snakes are pretty scary sometimes. The fear of earthquakes, the fear of what's out there in the dark: Those

kinds of fears, the Buddha doesn't encourage you to develop. He does encourage you to develop the fear of doing something that's going to be unskillful, that's going to cause harm. So you want to exercise that fear. Our society is one that tends to pooh-pooh that, and they encourage you to do all kinds of unskillful things. If you have any sense of shame or conscience around that, they accuse of not being a real man or not being tough enough, or whatever. It's a very unhealthy culture.

Then you notice the two big enemies of shame and compunction. One is anger. When anger comes up, it pushes those attitudes out of the way. It wants to do what it wants to do. It feels justified in doing it and doesn't want to hear anything else. If you add that with some intoxicants, then shame and compunction just go by the board.

So these four qualities of conviction, virtue, shame, and compunction all go together and they should strengthen one another. These are real treasures because they keep you from doing things that you'll later regret.

I remember hearing over the radio one time, a Vietnam vet, fifty-some years after the war, remembering a young Vietnamese girl that he killed during the war. As he said, he thinks about her every night, and the memory is driving him crazy. He would give a million dollars to be able to go back and undo that act. Well, you can't go back and undo the things you've done in the past. But if you can have an attitude that will prevent you from doing those things to begin with, see how much it's worth: more than a million dollars.

Skillful action doesn't just mean avoiding unskillful things, but also means actively doing skillful things. This is what the next treasure is about, i.e., generosity, the willingness to give, seeing that you've got something you'd like to share. It doesn't have to necessarily be a material thing. It could be that you give of your time; you give of your experience; you give of your energy; you give forgiveness. This willingness to share, in itself, is a real treasure because it creates a really good state of mind, a state of mind that says, "You know, I have more than enough." That's a wealthy state of mind. It's a state of mind that's a lot less likely to do the kinds of things that would cause you to break the precepts.

Then there's learning. You learn about right view. You learn about the teachings of the Dhamma as best you can. You don't have to learn about all of them, but enough to give yourself guidance. It's one of the reasons why we chant so often, because these phrases get into your head and they'll pop up sometimes right when you need them—reflections on the body; reflections on aging, illness and death; reflections on what is a true friend, what's not a true friend. There are reasons why these passages were chosen by Ajaan Suwat. We chant them so often

so that they can get burned into your mind, so that they're there when you need them.

Finally, there's discernment. As Ajaan Lee says, this is probably the most important treasure on the list, because he says you could be lacking in other things, but as long as you have discernment— of course, here he means discernment that's nurtured by proper conviction and virtue and all the others—you can set yourself up in life, even if you lack other things. He said if you lack discernment, you may be sitting right over gold and you won't be able to make any use out of it. If you have discernment, you may be living in a place with nothing but grass and dirt, but you can make something out of that grass and dirt. You can turn it into gold.

In other words, you learn how to look at your mind to see what's wrong with it, but also see what potentials are right with it, and you learn how to develop those potentials, even in the face of what seem to be overwhelming odds.

Look at the forest ajaans. Most of them were the sons of peasants, and yet that didn't stop them from gaining awakening. It's because they had discernment. They developed their discernment.

So these are your treasures. These are the things that will keep you safe, regardless of what happens in the future. In particular, they keep you safe from the biggest danger, the worst thing that could happen to you, i.e., that you develop wrong view and start acting in ways that would be harmful to yourself and others. The results of that would last for a long, long time. So remember, when you start feeling fear about the future, ask yourself, "What are the appropriate things to fear?" Once you get your priorities straight, that's an act of discernment—and that's a treasure right there.