Making Inner Wealth

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We’ve spent so much of our lives watching television that subconsciously we tend to think of the activity of watching television as a model for our experience of the present moment. When you watch television, you’re entirely passive. Everything is being provided to you with a minimum of effort on your part. When we think of the picture of what it is to experience the present moment, we have a similar picture, that we’re entirely passive, just watching what’s happening. We may react or not react, but there’s a givenness to the present moment that’s totally beyond our control. One of the Buddha’s main insights was realizing that we’re a lot more active in shaping the present moment than we think. What we experience in the present moment are the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and consciousness. From those aggregates we build a lot of our present experience. But even the aggregates themselves, the fact that we experience them, has an element of fabrication, an element of intention in them. We’re a lot more active in shaping the present moment than we think. Experiments that they’ve done with the psychology of pain tend to bear this out. At any given moment there are lots of sensations coming into the nervous system. There are a lot of switching stations in the nervous system that turn on and turn off and either tend to convey a sensation further up the system, closer and closer to the central nervous system, to the brain, or they turn it off or they magnify them. The turning off and the sending on and the magnifying are actually subconscious, intentional choices. So many times by the time a sensation registers in your brain, it’s already been filtered and commented on and evaluated. In ways that you’re just barely aware of. What this means for us as meditators is that we can take a more active role in shaping how we experience the present, what we do with the present moment. In other words, we’re not simply consumers of experience. We’re not totally on the passive end. We can shape it. We have to look at the raw material of the present moment as potentials. As meditators, we’re trying to develop the tools to use those potentials in the best way possible. So we’re not just on the consuming end, but we regard each moment, each opportunity as it comes by in terms of what good we can get out of it. Not just what pleasure or pain, because the pleasure and pain are part of the experience. But what good we can get out of the pleasure and pain, what good we can get out of the potentials that are being presented to us. This works on the outside and on the inside level. On the outside level, we regard the opportunities around us as opportunities to develop what are called noble treasures or noble wealth, qualities of the mind that will be helpful to us. John Lee has a nice image. He says, “The material things we have, the physical things we have, are like a fruit. If we’re not careful, the fruit’s going to rot.” So what are we going to do? Are we just going to eat the fruit and leave it at that? Or are we going to get something more out of it? If you notice that within each fruit there’s a seed, you save the seeds and you plant them. That opens up the possibility for more fruit in the future. So when you gain wealth, when you gain material things, or gain opportunities of various kinds, try to look at them as opportunities for the future, what seeds they have that you can develop. Always be on the lookout for opportunities to develop good qualities of mind. When you’re operating on this level, then your attitude, say, towards the work that’s being shared around the monastery changes. Instead of dividing things up and saying, “We want to be absolutely fair here. Make sure nobody gets exploited, nobody does more than his share,” you want to look for opportunities to do more than your share. All those are possibilities for converting those opportunities into noble wealth, good qualities. Conviction that the good you do is not wasted, that the opportunities you have have their seeds that can be developed into good qualities of the mind. When material things come, don’t think simply of the pleasure you can get out of the material things. Think of what use they have, what potential they have for developing good qualities of the mind, good opportunities on into the future. That’s the basic principle of this. Teaching on noble wealth. There’s a standard list. There are seven altogether. Conviction and the principle of karma. Holding by the precepts. Having a sense of shame at the idea of doing something that’s below your principles. Having fear of the consequences of doing evil. Knowledge of the Dhamma. Having heard a lot, having read a lot, listening to a lot. Generosity and discernment. Look at the opportunities that you get in the course of the day. That’s just that—opportunities for developing noble wealth, so that you don’t squander your pleasure, don’t squander the pain. Because both pleasure and pain have their uses. They can be used as tools if you use them properly. That’s on the outside level. On the inside level, it’s the same thing. It’s a similar principle. When we’re meditating, we’re taking something very basic, the fact that we have a breath that comes in and goes out, and learning how to make the most of it. The fact that the breath can be adjusted, that it’s not totally automatic. It gives us a good object lesson in how much of our experience is shaped by our intentions. We tend to think that the breath is a given, but simply by the fact of focusing on the breath, you change it. As you think about the breath coming in and going out, that has an effect on how the breath actually goes in and how it actually goes out. If you change your perception, you can change your physical experience of the breath. So here’s another good lesson in the fact that you’re shaping the present moment by what you notice, by what you decide not to notice, what you tend to amplify, what things you tend to push out of your awareness, what connections you perceive. These preconceived notions you have have a huge effect on how you experience the physical sensation of the breath. The next question is, what are you going to do with it? What are you going to do with this knowledge? Well, you try to give the mind a good, solid basis in the present moment. At the very least, learn how to breathe so you’re not putting unnecessary stress on the body. You’re putting unnecessary strain on the mind. It may seem selfish, but it’s not. If you put less and less stress, less and less unnecessary strain on yourself, you find that you have greater strength to help other people. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about people who are wounded by the arrow of physical pain, and they don’t leave it there. They get upset. They get worked up around the pain, and they start shooting themselves with more arrows that way. If you’re going around with arrows sticking all over you like Saint Sebastian, there’s no way you’re going to be able to help anybody else. Your movements are restricted. Your strength just bleeds away. But if you learn how to breathe in a way that’s strengthening, and from that learn how to deal with other problems in the mind, ways that you marshal your thoughts that may be inefficient, that may cause a lot of unnecessary stress and strain. When you learn how to run your body and mind in a lot more efficient way, you find you have a lot more strength. You’re a lot more able to help other people. And you gain this strength in a way that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. It’s not like strength of the body, where you have to eat more in order to build up the body. In that way, you’re taking things away from other people. You’re spending your money in ways that could have been used to help other people. That’s what strength of mind is like. It doesn’t have to take anything away from anyone else. It’s simply that you’re observing the way you think, observing the way you react to feelings, the way you shape your experience, and learning how to shape it in a new way that causes less suffering, less strain, and less stress. This way, you have more to offer. You find that you have more opportunities to develop noble wealth, not just in terms of generosity, but all the forms of noble wealth. They become treasures that are not only your treasures, but treasures you can share, and you never run out. Again, there’s a difference between noble wealth and physical wealth. When you share out physical wealth, you’re left with less physical wealth. But when you share your noble wealth, it just grows and grows and grows. So when you look at the present moment, don’t look at it as something that you’re passively subject to. Don’t look at it simply in terms of what pleasure you can squeeze out of it before the pain becomes unbearable and you have to push it away. Look at it as an opportunity. You’ve got raw materials here, and as a meditator you’re learning the tools to use those raw materials in a way that is really productive, so that you have something to show for the fact that you’ve been a human being, that you’ve had this time, you’ve had this opportunity to taste the pleasures of the human life. Not simply taste them, but also turn them into raw materials for something even better. In this way, every moment in your life offers an opportunity. Every moment in your life has a potential, if you learn to look for it.

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