A Wealthy Memory

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The Buddha’s analysis of the causes of suffering makes the point that the question of whether we’re going to suffer or not depends primarily on what we bring into the present moment. In other words, you don’t necessarily suffer because there are painful feelings in the present. Sometimes you can suffer from pleasant feelings in the present, and vice versa. There can be a great deal of pain and difficulty in the present moment, but you don’t have to suffer. It all depends on what you bring with you to the experience of the present. So you want to ask yourself, “Are you bringing wealth or are you bringing poverty to the present moment?” In other words, is your mind filled with impoverished ideas, impoverished values, impoverished knowledge, or does it have wealth in these areas? Part of the wealth you want to bring, of course, is the series of techniques and approaches you learn in the meditation. Knowing how to focus on the breath, keeping the breath comfortable in the midst of different circumstances, and reminding yourself that it’s important to do that is a kind of wealth. Realizing that your mind is a lot more likely to think of the right thing to do or say when it’s inhabiting a comfortable body, when your body doesn’t feel invaded by the effects of fear or anger or other unskillful emotions. When you can work through some of those effects by the way you breathe, that’s an important skill to bring with you. It’s an important kind of wealth. But this wealth is not just a matter of techniques. It’s a matter of attitudes. One of the members of the list of noble wealth is knowledge of truth, many truths. What this means is having memorized the teachings of the Buddha and having thought them through, and having them in your memory bank. So when a situation comes up, you can apply the right attitude. This is why, in the past, people memorized a lot. They memorized the Dhammapada, memorized a lot of the basic chants. There’s a story of a woman in the Pali Canon who, every morning, would get up before dawn and she would recite the last section of the Sutta Navatta, those sixteen poems of the Brahmins coming to see the Buddha. So she carried that knowledge around inside her. When you have things like that memorized, you can be surprised at how they pop up into your mind at the right time, when you really need them. I experienced something like this back in the year after John Fuhring passed away. It was a very difficult year. There were a lot of strange political pressures in the monastery. I found myself thrown into some of these situations that John Fuhring had always been the one to handle before, and suddenly I had to make the decisions. I was confronted with some very difficult people, very difficult situations, and different bits and pieces and snatches of our conversations I’d had with John Fuhring would come into my mind at the right time to remind me of what the proper attitude would be. That’s why I started writing these things down, realizing I didn’t want to forget them. That was the beginning of the book that is now awareness itself. But it was that experience of having good Dharma teachings in the mind, and seeing how valuable those were, as little reminders of what the right attitude is, to remind me that we’re working here on the practice, not just on the practice, not technique of breath meditation, but it involves all of your values. An important part of the meditation is sorting through what are the things you carry around with you. Whose voices are you listening to? Are you listening to the voice of the Buddha or the voice of somebody who didn’t mean all that well to you, just yelled at you when you were young? All kinds of crazy and unskillful ideas that you’ve picked up and you carry around with you all the time. You’ve got to ask yourself this. Look at those attitudes you picked up from, and are they a form of wealth or are they a form of poverty? Do you really believe in those attitudes when you get to examine them calmly? And if not, learn to replace them with other attitudes that are better. Read up on Ajahn Lee, Ajahn Mahaprabhu, all the great Ajahns. Look through the Dhammapada to find verses that are appropriate for your particular situation in life and memorize them. This is why we have these chants in English every evening, to remind you of proper attitudes to have, to bring to a particular situation. You might say, “Well, I can’t embody those attitudes because, after all, those are the attitudes of noble disciples.” I’m not a noble disciple yet. You might tell yourself that. But that’s not the proper attitude at all. How are you going to learn to become a noble disciple? Where did the noble disciples come from? They came from unawakened people. But they learned to adopt these attitudes, and that was part of what made them noble. So if you’re in a particular situation, ask yourself, “What would Ajahn Sawat say?” or “What would Ajahn Phuong say?” or “What would the Buddha say?” Try to keep them in mind. If you forget them, it’s like you’re cutting yourself off at the root. You’re adrift and you go back to the old voices in your mind, the people you knew when you were younger, the things that came through the mass media. How many of the songs going through your head are songs about wisdom, the old folk songs that would teach wise attitudes? And how many of them are commercial jingles, rock and roll songs with crazy messages? These are all a form of poverty. They impoverish our wisdom. They teach us unskillful attitudes to bring to the present moment. So you’ve got to replace them. Not simply with the techniques of the meditation, but also trying to think about the attitude of someone who’s really wise. And you look at what the Buddha had to say, and his noble disciples, to give you a sense of what that wisdom is. I was once reading a curriculum that someone had set up for studying the Pali Canon, and that curriculum was essentially based around the Majjhima Nagaya, not the other big Nagayas. And it was sprinkled here and there with some readings in the Dhammapada and the other verses, not so much for real Dharma as it seemed, but simply as inspiration, nice ideas to carry around. Well, it’s those good ideas. That’s where the real Dharma is. It’s the values that they embody. That’s the context for the Dharma. The more technical, philosophical details that you find in the other texts lack their context unless they’re embedded within the lessons you can learn from something like the Dhammapada or the Itthiputtaka. So it’s good to read these things regularly, not just read them. Try to memorize some of the verses that seem most appropriate for the difficulties you know you’re facing in your life. So they’ll be there to remind you. It’s going to get built into the rhythm of the blood flowing through your veins, through your ears, through your brain, so that as you approach the present moment, you bring wealth, the wealth of memorized wisdom. And after all, the memorized wisdom, you’ll start sprouting into your own wisdom, too. It’s easy, as meditators, to look down on what is called “book knowledge,” but that’s not the proper attitude. The people who claim that book knowledge is everything, those are the ones you can’t listen to. But there’s a lot of good wisdom in the books, and it’s a form of inner wealth to have that memorized. Then as you apply that together with the techniques of the meditation, then you’ve got an abundance of wealth to bring to any situation.

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