Noble Wealth

October 16, 2013

We spend so much time trying to get things right in the world around us—in our home, at work, our belongings, our relationships with the people who are close to us—that we forget to get things right with our own minds. We’re just sitting here with a breath right now. After a moment of silence, remind yourself that the day will come when right now, right here, death is going to come. And if you can’t live with yourself right here, right now, what’s it going to be like when death comes? It’s going to be really hard to handle. But if you learn to settle in and really get to know this spot here in the present moment, that becomes your preparation. It’s like knowing that somebody’s going to mug you, or wants to mug you, at a certain spot in the street. So you go down and you check out that spot in the street. Where are the escape routes? And that way you’ve got yourself protected. John Lee likes to talk about death as getting ready to travel to a foreign country. You’ve got to get yourself prepared. What kind of wealth can you take with you? Well, the wealth that allows you to live with yourself right here, right now. The wealth inside the mind. A layperson once came to see the Buddha and was commenting on how wealthy this one millionaire was in the city where he was living. And the Buddha said, “Well, yeah, there is that kind of wealth. There is gold and there’s silver and all the other things that they used to measure wealth by in those days. But those things are dangerous, he said. They’re subject to being burned by fire, washed away by floods, and people can come and try to take them away from you. And in trying to take them away, they can cause you a lot of damage.” He said, “The real wealth is the wealth you build in the mind. It’s the wealth that allows you to live with yourself while you’re here. When you sit quietly, the mind is at ease. And it’s the kind of wealth you can take with you when you go. Fire can’t burn it. When you go, you take it with you automatically. You don’t have to stick it in your luggage and lug it around.” The concentration we’re working on right now, this is a kind of inner wealth. If you know that you can focus the mind inside and get it really comfortable inside, that can protect you in a lot of ways. And that’s what a lot of what our wealth is for, is to protect us. So here’s a really good protection. You’ve got a sense of well-being. Other people can do what they want, but this spot right here is something they can’t touch. And it’s very close to your own mind, close to your own heart, a sense of well-being you can take with you wherever you go. But just doing the concentration isn’t enough. You can’t just stick a concentration practice into your life and think that it’s going to change everything else automatically. You have to look at your life and figure out what’s conducive and what’s not conducive, what’s helpful and what’s not helpful. You have to maintain that sense of well-being in mind. When the Buddha was talking to that layperson, he listed seven things that are inner wealth or noble wealth. The first is a sense of conviction, conviction that the Buddha really was awakened. You might ask, “Well, what does that have to do with you?” It’s because the Buddha sets an example. He shows that through human effort you can find a happiness that doesn’t die. That’s what’s related immediately to you, that your efforts really do make a difference. The whole principle of karma revolves around this, that your actions really do make a difference in your life. And if you develop them to be really skillful, they can take you all the way to a happiness that doesn’t die, just like the Buddha’s. If you don’t, there’s a lot of danger. There’s the danger of picking up bad examples from other people, from giving in to your own greed, aversion, delusion, when you say, “Well, it doesn’t really matter what I do. The sun’s going to go nova someday. It’s all going to get burned up anyhow.” But this process of what they call “wandering on” when you die and you’re reborn, it can go on and on, even when the sun goes nova and then there’s a new sun that replaces it. So you want something that won’t be burned even by the sun exploding. And that’s your actions, the results of your actions. Those go with the mind. They leave an imprint. The next two forms of noble wealth follow right on that, as virtue. In other words, you decide you don’t want to do anything that’s going to harm anyone. We’ve got the five precepts. There’s the precept against killing, against stealing, against having illicit sex, against lying, and against taking intoxicants. Of the five, the most important one is the one against lying. The Buddha placed a high value on the principle of truth. He said, “If someone feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie, you can’t trust them to avoid any other kind of evil.” So you want to develop this quality of truth. When you see that something’s harmful, you make up your mind you really are going to follow through and avoid it. If you see something’s good, you’re really going to try to stick with it, even when it’s hard. You’re true to yourself. You’re true to this principle of following through with what you really see is right and wrong. And when you’re true, then you get to see the truth. And to back up that wealth of truth, you have the virtue of the wealth of shame and compunction. A lot of us don’t like to hear the word “shame.” Psychologists spend a lot of time telling us about how damaging shame can be. But they’re talking about the unhealthy form of shame, and the Buddha’s talking about the healthy form, which is when you realize that a certain action is beneath you. It’s not worthy of you. You would be ashamed to do it. That goes along with high self-esteem and really is a form of wealth. It goes together with compunction, which is when you realize that if you do something unskillful, there are going to be bad consequences down the line. And you really want to avoid those things. We’ve suffered enough in our lives. There’s no need to do more unskillful things to create more suffering. So when you think of doing something that’s up against the precepts, something that’s unskillful, something on your side, you say, “No,” and you shrink away. That’s a form of wealth. Because if you don’t have it, you end up doing things that you’re later going to regret. And then once they’re done, you can’t take them back. No matter how much money you’ve spent, you can’t take away the memory of what you’ve done. I was listening to a radio show one time when this one guy was talking about how when he was in Vietnam, he’d killed some children. And that thought stayed with him. He said it was driving him crazy to give any amount of money to be able to forget that, to go back and undo it. You really feel sorry for him, but what can you do? Something’s done. But you look at your own life and you realize, okay, you want to avoid that situation. So you develop this quality of shame and compunction around unskillful things. That’s a form of wealth. The wealth of a mind at peace, a mind that has a sense of its own goodness and its own worth. And there are three more kinds of wealth, one of which is learning the Dhamma, listening to the Dhamma to figure out what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s skillful, what’s not, get the advice of the Buddha and the other great teachers of the past. At the very least, they give you some ideas to ponder, things to think about, about what’s worthwhile in life and what’s not. And they put those teachings to the test. We’ve got so many crazy things going around in our head that we’ve picked up from the media, from the internet, from TV, from all kinds of people. And why do they put those things in our head? They want to sell us something. And the Buddha wasn’t trying to sell anything. He just wanted to let everybody else know, “This is how you do it.” So let that voice get into your head as well. So when difficult situations come up, you can remember, “Oh, the Buddha said right here that this would be skillful, that would be unskillful. Let’s give his teachings a try.” The Buddha was no fool. He had tested everything he taught. And teachings like that are hard to find. This is why we bow down to them, because they give us good guidance. So it’s good to have that as a fund of knowledge that you’ve listened to and read. Then there’s the wealth of generosity. When you realize that you have more than enough of something, and you have either things to share or time to share or insights to share, or even forgiveness to give somebody, you go ahead and give it. You find that your mind feels a lot broader, more expansive. The other person gains from what you’ve given, and you gain in developing this quality of mind. You realize you’re not totally wrapped up in your own problems. You can see other people’s problems and realize, “Okay, they need something. I’ve got something I can share. I’m happy to give it.” That’s what you think. That quality of mind is a much nicer mind to live in otherwise, if you’re totally conscious only of your own problems. It’s like living in a narrow little room with no light, no air. Whereas if you’re generous and you find that everywhere in the world is your home, you find that too is a form of wealth inside. Then there’s the wealth of discernment. As the Buddha said, discernment begins with the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That connects back to the principle of conviction, that your actions really do make a difference. You’ve decided you want to direct your actions, not just for little pleasures that come and go, but you want something that’s long, solid, and lasting. And to be lasting, it has to be harmless. So you always keep that in mind. What’s the skillful thing to do? What can I learn about being more skillful? That’s always a good attitude to have. You go into a situation and sometimes you’re not sure about what’s going to be the best thing to do. But the best thing to carry into situations like that is the attitude of, “If I don’t already know, I want to learn.” So you’re willing to learn from your mistakes, recognize them when they happen, that, “Yes, that was a mistake. I didn’t want to cause anyone any harm,” and end up causing harm. That’s better than going into a situation not caring about whether you want to cause any harm, and you find out you cause a lot of harm. That’s hard to live with. But if you go in realizing, “I tried my best, and I still realized I didn’t know certain things,” well, that’s how you learn. So you don’t have to repeat that mistake the next time around. This is how your discernment grows. It starts from the outside and then goes inside, and you start seeing ways of thinking that cause harm to yourself. All these forms of wealth are things that you don’t just pick up lying around you. You develop them through your actions. And you sustain yourself with a sense of well-being that comes from the concentration. You don’t let yourself get waylaid by what the world out there is saying. They don’t know anything about true happiness. All they’ve got are the things they’re trying to sell you. And they want you to content yourself with that. But you have to ask yourself, “Is that what you want out of your life? Just to have a lot of things that you’re going to have to leave when you go?” And all you’ve got left is the karma that came from the way you got those things. It’s much better to focus on the wealth that comes inside. By trying to be skillful, trying to find out what is it that when you do it would lead to your long-term welfare and happiness. What things do you avoid that would lead to long-term suffering? Just holding that question in mind. That’s what covers all the forms of noble wealth. So one of the advantages of getting the mind quiet like this is it gives you some time and a chance to look at your life and ask yourself, “What do you really want out of it?” You realize you’ve got the Buddha there, happy to give you his advice based on his experience of finding a true happiness that doesn’t change, doesn’t die, doesn’t disappoint. And as you try to develop the different forms of wealth that he talked about, you find they really do give a sense of well-being. And well-being is solid and secure. It’s a wealth that nobody will be able to take away from you, nothing will be able to destroy. And even when your body is no longer a place you can live, you’ve still got this wealth to take with you and to prepare the next place where you’re going to go. So it’s a really good investment of your time.

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