Treasures from the East

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There’s a long tradition in Western culture that wisdom comes from the East. Socrates claimed to have gained his wisdom from a woman who came from the East, Diatima. She’s the only person in all of the Socratic dialogues where Socrates doesn’t argue with what she has to say. Later the Stoics came into Athens and they too claimed to bring their wisdom from the East. And of course there’s the story of the three wise men who came to see the baby Jesus. But the story here says that they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. If they were really wise, they would have brought something better. If they’d been trained by the Buddha, they would have known that these are not really treasures. There’s that famous dialogue where someone comes to see the Buddha and doesn’t have anything better to say except to comment on how rich somebody else in that city is, in terms of gold and silver. And the Buddha says that kind of treasure is not really secure. Fire can burn it. Water can wash it away. Kings or thieves could steal it. What’s really safe are the treasures you develop in the mind. He lists seven. The first is conviction. Of course that means conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. But what does that mean for us? It means that there’s a human being who, through his own efforts, was able to find a deathless happiness. He was able to teach it so that other people can find it too. And the qualities that he used to find that happiness are things that we all have in a potential form. The implication being that if you can do it, you can do it too. He cited three qualities. Heedfulness, ardency, resolution. Heedfulness, realizing that your actions do have consequences. You have to be very careful about what you do. Because your actions come from the mind, you have to be very careful about what you allow to grow and develop inside the mind, in which you have to learn how to put aside. Like we’re doing right now as we meditate. We’re staying with the breath. We’re putting aside all the thoughts. We have to be watchful about what we’re doing. You’re developing a habit, what the Buddha calls commitment and reflection. You commit to one object. And then you reflect on your mind to see how well it’s going. And then you’re ardent, trying to do this well, and resolute in the face of difficulties. Of course, the major difficulties are inside. Part of your mind doesn’t want to meditate and wants to do something else. But you have to be resolute in saying no, and have to be effective in saying no. But you can do this. In fact, that’s a large part of your ability to do it, is having that conviction. Yes, it is possible. Not just possible in general, but possible for you. Think about the Buddhist students. There are a lot of people who are pretty unlikely. Lepers, outcasts, a woman coming back from a picnic with her friends. All decked out in all of her ornaments. She stops off and sees the Buddha on the way back. He teaches her and she becomes a non-returner. That wasn’t in the afternoon program. But that’s what happened. So just because you’re unlikely doesn’t mean that you’re not possible as a student of the Buddha. Always keep that in mind. That’s a treasure. And as with all treasures, things that are really valuable, you want to maintain it. The good thing about the Buddhist treasures is that nobody else can take them away from you. You’re the only one who can throw them away. So make sure you don’t throw them away. Have this conviction that yes, you can do this. The next two treasures are shame and compunction. Shame is a word we don’t like to hear because we associate it with one kind of shame, the shame that’s the opposite of pride. But the Buddha is talking about another kind of shame, the opposite of shamelessness, which is the attitude that you’re going to do what you want and you don’t care what other people think. You don’t care what wise people think or anybody thinks. You’re just going to do what you want to do. Of course that means you close yourself off to the counsel of the wise. You’re just giving free reign to your desires. You’ve been doing that for a long time. So proper shame is taking into consideration the words of the wise. Then compunction goes together that you fear the consequences of doing something that would be unwise. Some people ask when the Buddha lists the different causes for unskillful behavior, greed, aversion, and delusion, why doesn’t he list fear? That’s because some fear is actually skillful. It’s good to be afraid of this power that you have to do something wrong, to do something harmful. This is a kind of fear that comes not from a sense of weakness, but from conviction in your own power. You can create harm, but you don’t have to. You can act in ways that are harmless. So you want to listen to that fear, you want to listen to that shame. We don’t like fear, we don’t like shame, but they have their uses on the path. The fourth treasure is virtue. When you actually stick with the precepts, you realize that they’re a good counsel. There are times when you might be able to make some immediate profit off of lying or stealing, a little bit of enjoyment from the intoxicants around, but you realize that no, you’re above that. There’s a sense of honor that goes with the precepts. That too is a treasure. This treasure of generosity. When you’re able to give even times when it may be difficult to give, but you’re able to give, and here there’s a sense of wealth. If the gift was difficult, it required some sacrifice on your part, that too has a sense of honor. So you realize that material things have only a limited value. The whole issue is about the qualities of your mind. That’s where your true wealth is. You try to nurture those qualities of mind through your virtue, through your generosity. Then on top of that, there’s the treasure of learning the Dhamma. You don’t have to learn all the suttas and the canon, but it’s good to know the basic principles and some of the Buddhist short sayings that can help you when you’re out in the world, faced with difficult situations. The words of the Buddha can remind you what is really important in life, what’s not so important. Because we live in this land of wrong view, where people glorify wealth, status, fame. And those things are all empty. They don’t guarantee any goodness, they don’t guarantee any wisdom at all. So you’ve got to keep your priorities straight. And a good knowledge of the Dhamma can also make sure that you don’t get misled by false Dhamma. Take the teaching on contemplation. It means to be content with material things. If you have food, clothing, and shelters enough to get by, enough to practice, it’s plenty. You don’t have to go struggling to get more. And some people will tell you, well, you should also be content with whatever comes up in your mind. But Buddha never taught that. He said being discontent, even with his skillful qualities, was the secret to his awakening. So if you know that he taught that, it’s good to hold in mind. They don’t fall for the false reasoning of false Dhamma. They find there’s discernment. The Buddha defines this as penetrating knowledge of arising and passing away. And penetrating means that you see causes, you see results, you see the variety of results that a particular quality can give rise to. You can also see how to avoid suffering around that particular quality. So you’re not just watching things coming and going. Your knowledge is penetrating. It sees cause and effect. Like seeing cause and effect in your own mind. As you meditate, you’re not just watching things come and go. You’re actually actively giving rise to a state of concentration. You’re experimenting. You say, how about doing this, doing that, see what the results are. This is how scientists understand cause and effect. They manipulate the causes, see what happens. They have to be very conscious of what they’re doing. If they don’t realize how they’re manipulating the causes, then they can’t really tell which causes have an effect and which ones don’t, or what that effect is. So again, they have to be very reflective about what they’re doing as they design their experiments and carry them out. This is what we’re doing right here. Make up our minds to stay with the breath. Realize that if you want to stay with the breath, it has to be comfortable. But when the breath is comfortable, there’s the danger of zoning out. It’s hard to counteract that. So the Buddha gives you some advice. Try being aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Be very conscious of what you can do to give rise to a sense of refreshment and rapture, pleasure. Be very conscious of how your perceptions and feelings shape your mind. Try to use that knowledge, your knowledge of how the body is affected by the breath, so you can calm the body down. Your knowledge about how the mind is affected by perceptions and feelings to calm the mind down. What kind of perception of the breath makes it comfortable? Right now, what kind of perception soothes your mind? Here again, you experiment. You reflect on what you’re doing. You develop that quality. It’s called metacognition. You’re conscious of what you’re doing, you’re conscious of the results. And then you have the quality of ardency. One of the qualities that enabled the Buddha to gain awakening. That you’re trying to do this as well as you can. Someone sent me a link the other day to a Dhamma talk called “Lower Your Standards.” I didn’t even want to listen to the talk. Because the Buddha is all about raising your standards. He’s saying there is a happiness that is possible through developing these treasures. That’s totally free. Free of all restrictions. The treasure is there. The Buddha found it. You’re convinced of that. Why settle for anything less? When you have these treasures, then when the treasures of the world come and go, you’re not so blown away. Because that’s the nature of worldly treasures. As John Lee said, the treasures of the world have a goodness that’s not true, and they have a truth that’s not good. But the treasures of the Dhamma are true and good. So those are the ones that you want to amass.

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