Treasure at Hand (outdoors)

April 11, 2021

Close your eyes, watch the breath. It’s something right there. Whether there’s a pandemic or no pandemic, you’ve always got your breath right here. So be on good terms with it. Try to figure out what kind of breathing feels good right now. Long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light. Experiment and see what breathing feels best for the body, feels best for the mind. John Fu and my teacher called this grass at the corral gate. An opportunity to do good, it’s right near you. All too often the cows in the corral, as soon as they open the gate, they go running out to the meadow and they miss the grass that’s right there at the side of the gate. So look around you. There’s opportunities to do good in all places, no matter where you are. This past year has been the year of the pandemic. I’ve heard people say this was the year that wasn’t. Nothing good came out of it. Well, that really depends on what you put into it. Show us that you can do good in all situations, no matter how confining they may be, no matter how many hardships you may have to face. There’s always the opportunity to do good. So look around. You can make this a year that has a lot of use, a lot of purpose. That’s why it’s good to stop and reflect on the year that’s passed, the year that’s ahead of us. See that the good that you did this past year may not be up to what you want. So there’s an opportunity for improvement. Even if you’re living in confinement, living in difficult situations, it is possible to do good all the time and to amass wealth for the mind. The Buddha talks about seven kinds of wealth. He calls them noble wealth. It’s good to think about them here. They’re present and available for you to develop at all times. And as you amass this wealth, it’s not called greed. You’re actually following in line with the Buddha’s instructions of what you should do with your life, which is to figure out why there’s suffering, where it’s coming from, and especially where it’s coming from in your own mind, and then to develop good qualities in the mind. So as you develop these good qualities, they strengthen the mind and help attack the cause of suffering. And that way you can get past suffering. There are seven types of noble wealth altogether. Conviction, a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, virtue, learning, generosity, and discernment. And each one is a type of wealth for the mind that you can gather up in every circumstance. Conviction starts with conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, that there was someone who was able to find true happiness through his own efforts. And as he said, the qualities he had in his mind that enabled him to find this true happiness, resolution, ardency, heatfulness, these are things that all people can develop. And so when we have conviction in his awakening, we have conviction in ourselves and our own ability to find true happiness, to look at the potentials we have within us, and to realize that our actions really do make a difference. This is based on these three qualities, resolution, ardency, and heatfulness. And that’s an opportunity that’s open to everybody all the time. There’s skillful ways of avoiding harmful behavior, skillful ways of doing things that are positively good. Each time you breathe in, breathe out, there’s an opportunity to do something skillful. So look to it. Every day, every day, ask yourself, what can I do today? What can I accomplish today? What skillful things can I do today? And given your circumstances, you’re sure to be able to find something. And that way, the day amounts to something, and the days that amount to something add up to years that amount to something. In the same way with shame and compunction. Shame has gotten a bad rap here in the West. We think of people having a low esteem for themselves, but that’s not what shame means. There’s the shame that’s the opposite of pride, but there’s also the shame that’s the opposite of shamelessness, and it’s the second kind that the Buddha’s talking about. When you realize that you might want to do something that’s beneath you, and you think about the people that you respect and what they would think of you if you did that, that holds you in check. The same with compunction. Compunction has nothing to do with other people, it’s simply you know yourself that if you act on unskillful motives, there’s going to be suffering down the line. So why would you want to do it? You think about the long term. Right there is the beginning of wisdom. As the Buddha said, “Wisdom begins with a question. What when I do it will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? What will lead to long-term harm and pain?” And you want to avoid the pain. That desire is something to be encouraged, and it’s a form of wealth because it keeps you from doing things that you later regret. Many people have told me that as they’ve been forced to be by themselves in the course of the year, they start thinking about things they did in the past that they regret. You can’t go back and change them. The best thing you can do is recognize a mistake as a mistake and resolve that you’re not going to repeat it. But even better than that is making the determination, “Okay, I will not repeat this at all.” And have that sense of compunction to give force to that resolution. That you’re really not apathetic, that you really do care about your happiness. Because that’s what the Buddha is asking you to do. Care about your happiness. Don’t be careless and scatter it around, throw it away. Because the opportunity to create happiness is always there. And based on shame and compunction, then you live a virtuous life, a life in which you harm nobody. You don’t harm yourself, you don’t harm other people. It’s interesting in the Buddhist explanation of how you harm yourself and harm others. You harm yourself by breaking the precepts. Those five precepts that we took just now. Precept against killing, precept against stealing, against illicit sex, against lying, against taking intoxicants. If you break those precepts you harm yourself. You harm others by getting them to break the precepts. Because after all, each of us is going to be happy or miserable depending on our actions. So the worst harm you can do to somebody else is to get them to act in ways that are unskillful. The best way you can help them is to get them to act in ways that are skillful. Help good qualities in the mind. This becomes a form of wealth. Because as the Buddha said, if you don’t do harmful things, harm is not going to come to you. The image he gives is your hand. He says if you don’t have a wound on your hand, then you can handle poison and it doesn’t seep in through the skin. But if there is a wound, then all you have to do is touch the poison and it goes right into the blood. So the wound here of course refers to unskillful things that you’ve done. And if you realize you haven’t done anything unskillful, then the harm is not going to come to you. And there’s a sense of self-esteem that comes from that. So this is the self-esteem that comes with a sense of shame and compunction. You realize that certain things are beneath you. And you can be proud of yourself that you don’t give into the temptation to follow through with them. Another form of wealth is listening to the Dhamma. You listen to it. You read it. You think about it. You have a fund of knowledge. You can borrow the Buddha’s wisdom. As you’re working on developing your own wisdom, it’s good to start by borrowing somebody else’s first, trying it out for size. And so you read what the Buddha said about how there are skillful ways of acting, skillful ways of speaking, skillful ways of thinking, skillful ways of fabricating your life by the way you breathe, by the way you talk to yourself. By the perceptions you hold in your mind. And he gives you good examples. You read through the Canon, read through the teachings of the Ajahn. So lots of good examples for how to breathe, how to talk to yourself, what perceptions you hold in mind, the images you hold in mind as you go through the day and as you deal with other people. This way you borrow the Buddha’s wisdom. You put it to use. And you find that you make yourself suffer. You suffer less and less. Another form of inner wealth is generosity. If you have something extra, you share. You’re happy to share. And you realize that something good will come of it. The act of generosity is probably our very first experience of our freedom of choice when we were children. There came a point where we weren’t told we had to give something to somebody for Christmas or New Year’s or birthday or whatever. But it had something we wanted to give. When you act on that impulse, then you realize you don’t have to be a slave to your greed. You don’t have to be a slave to your desires. And that there’s a higher level of well-being that comes from not just devouring what you’ve got or using what you’ve got on your own, but sharing it with others. And this is an important realization that we do have that choice. When the Buddha was talking about the principles of karma, he starts out with the fact that there is what is given. The fact that we do have freedom of choice means that giving is of value. The fact that we’ve given something is something to be proud of. And that becomes a form of wealth. And if you don’t have material things to give, you can give of your time, you can give of your energy. You can give your forgiveness. That of the many types of giving is the most inexpensive, and yet often it’s the hardest. But forgiveness basically means that you pose no danger to people who have harmed you. Otherwise you get into this back and forth of animosity that goes on and doesn’t seem to end. They tell the story of two women. There was a major wife of a king. She couldn’t give birth to a child, and so she arranged for a minor wife, thinking that the king would appreciate what she had done for him. And so the king gave birth to a son, and all of a sudden the major wife realized that now the minor wife was going to be in a position above her, because of the son. So she killed the child and the minor wife. And the minor wife swore revenge. And then they were reborn. One was reborn as a chicken, the other was reborn as a fox. The fox ate the baby chickens. The mother swore revenge again. And then lifetime after lifetime, they just kept getting reborn as a pair. Until you lost track of who killed whose child first. Until finally the time of the Buddha. This one woman had a child, another woman wanted to kill the child. So the first woman goes right again and asks protection from the Buddha. And he teaches the two of them. Do you realize how long this has been going back and forth? And all the suffering that’s come from it. Instead of trying to sort out who was the worst, who started it, he says, “Here, just stop.” This is how you stop. Animosity. Just say, “Okay, whatever this other person has done to me, I’ll forgive the person. I pose no danger to that person anymore.” That too is a form of generosity, and it’s a form of wealth. It frees you from the animosity that can pull you down. The final form of wealth, which is the most important, is discernment. As I said, you borrow the Buddha’s discernment when you read the Dhamma. Then you develop your own. You look at your own actions and see when you do something, you act on a certain type of impulse or a certain type of intention, what are the results? You look at the results while you’re doing the action, you look at the results after the action is done. And if you realize that it caused harm, then you make a resolution not to repeat that. In the very beginning you’ve decided, if you foresee harm, you’re not going to act on it. But a lot of times we can end up causing harm that we didn’t foresee. But this is how you learn. This is how we overcome our delusion. By looking at our actions and learning to see patterns, what kind of impulses, what kind of intentions are skillful, which ones are not. In this way you make the Buddha’s wisdom your own. You learn how to trust yourself because you develop qualities in mind where you are a trustworthy judge of what’s right and what’s wrong. This is a true form of wealth because it means you can depend on yourself. You don’t have to go running to the book all the time or running to teachers all the time. You can think things through, observe, and you’ve made yourself a reliable observer. That way, wherever you go, you have wealth. As the John Lee said, if you have just this form of inner wealth, and even if you don’t have much of the others, still you can set yourself up in life. All you need is a machete, he says, and discernment and you can set yourself up in life. So look at these things. These are opportunities that are all around us, all the time. Forms of wealth that we can pick up, they’re right nearby, regardless of the situation outside. There are lots of ways we can amass inner wealth, every time we breathe in, every time we breathe out. So as you look forward to the year, we don’t know how much longer the pandemic is going to last, how many more waves are going to be, what hardships are going to be, what joys are going to be in the year that’s coming in now. But regardless of what happens outside, realize that the source of wealth is inside you. Focus there. Learn how to develop these forms of wealth. Develop your conviction, develop your sense of shame, compunction, your virtue. Develop your learning, your generosity, and discernment. No matter what, it will be a year in which you’ve amassed wealth. And this is the kind of wealth that you don’t leave when you leave this life. It goes with you, it’s on the other side waiting for you. It’s the kind of wealth that fire can’t burn, floods can’t wash away. So focus on amassing this wealth, and the coming year will be a year well spent. A year that is full of promise, a year that is full of opportunities that you’ve taken advantage of.

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