Gathering Noble Wealth

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Years back, someone invented the term “spiritual materialism.” It’s a critical term. They were criticizing people who come to the practice trying to gain something out of it, trying to hold on to something in the practice. But one of the ways of making sure that you didn’t hold on was if you had any good qualities, they tried to have you let them go, actually doing things that were against the rules of virtue to show that you were not attached to virtue. It was all very destructive. Actually, the Buddha talks a lot about gaining wealth in the practice, wealth in the mind, and having the attitude that you do gather goodness up. You gather up merit, you gather up noble wealth, and you hold on to it because it’s going to stand you in good stead. Think of the Buddha’s image of the path as being like a chariot. You’re riding along in a chariot, and if you don’t hold on, you’re going to fall off. So you hold on. Think of those forms of noble wealth that the Buddha talks about. Those are things you do want to amass. The good thing about this kind of wealth is that you’re not taking anything away from anyone else. The wealth of the world is such that when one person gains, somebody else loses. But with noble wealth, nobody loses. So it’s a perfectly innocent form of wealth, and it’s the most secure. Fire can’t burn it. Water can’t wash it away. Thieves and hateful heirs can’t take it from you. It’s something you really can depend on. So make sure as you’re practicing that you do amass noble wealth and take joy in that fact. Remember the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula when he talked about reflecting on his actions? After an action was done, he said, “If you saw that you’d done something wrong, you admitted it, and you resolved not to repeat that mistake. But if you saw you’d done something right, you took joy in that, and then you resolved to keep on practicing.” So just as you can think of a miser sitting in his room counting up his gold pieces and taking joy in that, you can count up all the good things you got in the practice. Take joy in that. It gives you sustenance and keeps you going. It starts with conviction, the Buddha’s awakening. The Buddha really did know what he was talking about. He found something extraordinary, a total end to suffering, something that can be done through human effort, qualities of heedfulness, ardency, resolution. Those are things he had developed in his mind. He said that anybody can develop them, and anybody who did develop them could gain the same results. So when you’re convinced that that’s true, it gives you the energy to become heedful, ardent, resolute. When you find something’s good, you stick with it. Some of the good things the Buddha talks about are a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, and virtue. These go together. Virtue, of course, is your desire not to harm anybody. You’re looking for your happiness in ways that don’t inflict any damage on yourself, don’t inflict any damage on others. It’s interesting to note, though, that when the Buddha talks about damaging yourself, it’s when you break the precepts. We tend to think of killing and stealing as harming other people, and they do. But the real harm comes to you. In the same way, if you really wanted to harm somebody else, you would get them to break the precepts. Because then that would become their karma, and they’d have to suffer in line with that. So you maintain that intention to be harmless. You hold on to that. Because you look at all the harm being done in the world right now, and you make sure that you’re not going to take the world as your example. You take the Buddha as your example. There’s a sentence in the Canon where a layperson who’s a stream-enter comes to see the Buddha with a friend, and he says, “If the Sangha of monks were on one side and the Buddha was on the other side, he would side with the Buddha. If the Sangha of monks and the Sangha of nuns were on one side and the Buddha was on the other, he’d side with the Buddha. If all the laymen and laywomen were on one side and the Buddha was on the other, he’d stick with the Buddha. Even if the whole world, whether it’s devas and maras and brahmanas, were on one side and the Buddha was on the other, he’d stick with the Buddha.” That’s the attitude we’ve got to take. Because the ways of the world are what? Up and down, up and down, in and out, and around. They don’t go anywhere in particular. It’s very easy for things to slide down. Whereas the Buddha said he taught a way that goes up against the stream, which means that the practice is going to have to involve resisting a lot of the currents of the world. But you want to learn how to take joy in that fact. You don’t like to see the world going down, but if it’s going to go down, you can take joy in the fact that you have the strength not to go with it. There are two qualities that help you learn this. One is shame and compunction. Shame is wanting to look good in the eyes of the noble ones. You can imagine the Buddha watching you. Remember that passage where he talks about the world as a governing principle, saying that there are people who would see your mind, could read your mind? What would they think? Would you want to think about things and plan things and make decisions that you wouldn’t be ashamed to have them? You have to remember that people of that sort, that you really want to look good in their eyes, are people of compassion. They have your genuine well-being at heart. So this is the kind of shame that’s not debilitating. It’s the kind of shame that wants your desire to do things only that are going to be for your own true interest. The sense of shame connects with the sense of compunction. Compunction is when you care about the consequences of your actions. You think about doing something and you realize it’s going to cause harm. You hold back. These two qualities acting together really do protect you. And then you’re further nurtured by studying the Buddha’s word. That, too, is a treasure, especially if you learn things and really learn them by heart. And you can really carry them around with you. They’ll be there to whisper in your ear at times when you really need it. Because we go through life, and at times when our emotions are running high, it’s very easy to forget the Dhamma. It’s very easy to think, “Well, this particular case is exceptional.” I was reading one time someone saying that the Buddha would have thought World War II was a good reason enough to put aside that precept against killing. But in a war in which millions and millions are killed, why would that be a reason to put aside the precept against killing? The problem is that when things get extreme, we say, “Well, this is really extremely bad. This must be an outstanding case, something that lies outside of the normal run of things. Therefore, the precepts are there for ordinary times, but they don’t apply now.” That kind of thinking is really bad. You have to keep remembering that even extreme things are not outside of the norm. So the precepts always hold. So you want to keep that in mind. So it’s good to have teachings that call you to your senses and have them firmly implanted in your mind. This is why we chant passages over and over again. They get into the rhythm of your body. You walk along and suddenly find yourself thinking about, say, the thirty-two parts of the body, or the recollection of eight aging, illness, and death. And it’s all for the good. They get into the rhythm of your body. They’re going to be there when you need them. Then there’s generosity. This too is a form of wealth. It creates a feeling of wealth, that’s for sure, when you have something you can give away. You can have some victory over that narrow part of the mind that wants to grasp and hold on and hold on and hold on, out of fear. And you can let go of that fear. You’ll be okay. You can survive without whatever the object is, or whatever amount of energy or knowledge you have that you want to give. That creates a sense of spaciousness in the mind, because it’s only people wealthy at heart who can give things away. There are some people who are wealthy in material things, but they have a really hard time giving away, which means they’re poor. But you can expand your sense of wealth by the way you give. And finally, the quality that encompasses them all is discernment, the understanding about the role of the mind in creating happiness. The role of the mind in creating suffering. And learning how to take the power of the mind and use it to the good. Seeing where the mind is tying itself down with its unnecessary clingings and cravings. So as you let them go, you find the mind has a lot more power to do things that really are useful, things that really are beneficial. It can withstand the desire to do things that you know are going to cause trouble down the line, but you like to do them. And it can encourage you to do the things that you don’t like to do, maybe, but you know will give good results down the line. The mind is strong enough so that it can think about the long term. When it doesn’t think about the long term, it’s a sign of, again, a sign of poverty, a sign of weakness. People are too hungry in the present moment to think about the long term. They’re not likely to do things that are for their own good. So feed yourself on noble wealth so that you realize you have plenty already of the good things you’ve done. Sometimes simply reflecting back on that can give you a lot of strength. And then you can use that strength to invest even further. The Buddha himself uses the language of investment. He didn’t shy away from the idea of spiritual materialism. He took it and said that you can put it to good use. The idea of gaining. We hear so much about letting go, letting go. Well, you have to remember there’s also developing, growing, flourishing. A lot of it depends on gaining and amassing noble wealth and learning how to enjoy the noble wealth you do have as fuel to keep on creating more. When they talk about wealth creators, this is where the term really applies. The attitude of the mind that takes whatever resources it has and knows how to use them and knows how to invest them in such a way that your noble wealth just keeps on growing.

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