

True Values

December 22, 2022

We live in a world where the values tend to focus on wealth, status, praise, sensual pleasures. One of the purposes of having a monastery, coming to a monastery, is to remind us that there are other things more important in life, that the values of the world can be pretty hollow and not very dependable. Wherever there's wealth, there's loss of wealth; where there's status, there's loss of status; where there's praise, criticism; where there's pleasure, pain. These things go around and around, just like the world itself. And they provide no real nourishment.

There's a famous American novel, *The Great Gatsby*, where the main character has been pursuing someone who has wealth, status, praise, and pleasure, and suddenly he sees that it's all denied to him. Then he looks around, and all those things suddenly seem totally meaningless, totally alien.

Now, when people feel alienated like that, it's very easy to go into despair, which is why we need an alternative set of values to remind us that there are actually good things in life, worthwhile things in life. And they're worth putting forth an effort to gain.

One of the strange features of American society is what used to be called the "gospel of relaxation." It started in the late nineteenth century, when people were told that Americans were too tense, too driven. They needed to relax, rest, appreciate just being in the present moment. We've had that gospel preached to us ever since. Now that Buddhism has come to America, a lot of it has fallen into that mode. But, if the good things in life require no effort at all, or learning how to do no effort, then life is pretty hopeless, because you can rest only for so long and then you have to eat. You need food, clothing, shelter, medicine. These things don't come by simply resting in the present moment. So you have to go back to work.

But the Dhamma actually provides an alternative set of values. They require work, but they're values that provide you with something that's really substantial, something that does provide genuine nourishment for the heart and mind. They can lead ultimately to a place where you're not let down, because the Dhamma has its own version of wealth, status, praise, and pleasure, too, but in ways that are totally harmless and very reliable.

The wealth, of course, is noble wealth. It starts with conviction that the quality of the mind state with which you act is really important. If you act with skillful intentions, the results are going to be good. You're convinced of that. If you act with unskillful intentions, the results are going to be bad. This is very different from what the world tells us. Success in their eyes can often come from being very devious. But the Buddha says genuine success, genuine well-

being, requires that you start with a good heart, that you desire to harm nobody. You have goodwill for all. You take that good intention, and then you work on it to make it skillful.

This involves developing other forms of noble wealth, such as a sense of shame and a sense of compunction—“shame,” here meaning the healthy kind of shame that’s the opposite of shamelessness. Compunction is the realization that if you do something unskillful, it’s going to cause suffering, so why bother? Why do it? You have the choice not to do it.

Then there’s the wealth of virtue, where you abstain from harming anyone at all. You hold to the precepts. That’s your expression of giving safety to everyone. And when you give safety to everyone in that way—you’re not going to kill, you’re not going to steal, you’re not going to have illicit sex, you’re not going to lie to them, you’re not going to get intoxicated and do stupid things—then you have a share in that safety, too.

Then there’s learning, generosity, discernment: These are all good things, good wealth, solid wealth, reliable wealth. So if you’re looking for someone who’s rich, if you want to be wealthy yourself, this is where you should look.

As for status, genuine status doesn’t come from being put in a position of power outside. It comes from having power over your own mind, your own ability to say No to your defilements. The more you can let go of your attachments, the more you can let go of your cravings and clingings, then the higher the level of your mind. The more you can bring the mind to concentration, the higher its level will be. Even more so, when you can reach the levels of the noble attainments. That kind of status is genuine, and again, it really is nourishing for the heart and mind.

As for praise, the Buddha says we try to develop the precepts that are pleasing to the noble ones. In other words, we hold to the precepts, but not in a way where we think that we’re better than other people, and not in a way where we get worked up and anxious over little details. As the Buddha says, we hold to them in a way that’s untorn, but at the same time is conducive to concentration. The fact that they’re untorn means we hold to them all the time. The fact that they’re conducive to concentration means that we hold to them in a way that puts the mind at ease. That, the Buddha says, is praiseworthy.

Then, finally, there’s the pleasure that comes from concentration, where all you have to do is to breathe, focus on your breath, and learn how to stay with the breath, learn how to relate with the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease, well-being, refreshment, even rapture inside. That, in turn, can lead to higher levels of well-being: the happiness of the deathless, which is the ultimate wealth, the ultimate status, the ultimate thing that’s praiseworthy. As we chant every day, “those who practice well, those who practice

straightforwardly,” the Sangha of the noble ones—the Buddha’s Sangha—get praised every day all over the world.

So, there are things that are worth working for. We’re not here just to relax, rest, and enjoy the present moment. We’re here to use the present moment in a way that gives genuine results, that does provide for our own safety, that does provide for our well-being, that’s not dangerous. The well-being of the world is very dangerous. When you gain wealth or status, it can go to your head. When you gain praise in the world, people in the world will praise almost anybody. They’ll praise almost any activity. You’ll find even when doing the most horrible actions, there’ll be somebody to praise you. But when you’re praised by the noble ones, that’s really worthwhile. And as I said, the pleasure that comes from concentration harms no one. It’s totally an inward thing.

So these things require effort, but the effort is well worth it. And we want to build our values around these things because these are values that are true not only in the monastery, simply that in the monastery they’re recognized; they’re encouraged. When you leave the monastery, you have to think about how to encourage yourself, because the world out there is certainly not going to encourage you. It’s going to want to pull you back to its versions of wealth, status, praise, and pleasure. So, you have to be really solid.

This is why we talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The Pali word refuge, *sarana*, can also mean something to keep in mind, something you keep recollecting all the time. The Triple Gem should be your recollection.

There’s a passage in the Canon where Mahanama, one of the Buddha’s cousins, is concerned. The Buddha spent the rains retreat near him, and he was able to listen to the Dhamma every day. Now the Buddha was going to go away at the end of the rains. He was concerned. “What should I do? How do I maintain this dwelling of my mind, the dwelling that’s built up of the values of the Dhamma?” And the Buddha says, “You recollect the Buddha, you recollect the Dhamma, the Sangha. You keep in mind your virtue and your generosity. You keep in mind the qualities that can make a person a deva.” Hold on to those values, in spite of what the world has to say.

As you keep these things in mind, you have a better idea of what’s worth working for in the world. After all, there *is* work in the world that’s actually good for the mind. It develops persistence. It develops endurance. It develops determination, equanimity. So you look for that kind of work, but you do it for the purpose of your true well-being. That’s something you always have to keep in mind.

So while you’re here, take advantage of the opportunity to develop these skills. While you’re out there, carry these values with you. Remind yourself of

the kind of wealth that really is worthwhile, the status, the praise, the pleasure that really is worthwhile. Don't get waylaid by the world's versions of these things. When you can keep these values in mind, that's a lot of the practice right there.