

Wilderness Wealth

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Ajaan Fuang used to tell the story of a time when he was on *tudong* with Ajaan Lee. They went out with a fairly large group. Ajaan Fuang, from his years with Ajaan Lee, had learned a very important lesson: Ajaan Lee never really seemed to be concerned about whether anyone was going to be able to keep up with him. He walked very fast in the forest. So Ajaan Fuang did his best to keep up with him. It turned out that on that trip someone else was carrying Ajaan Lee's bowl, another person was carrying his shoulder bag, another was carrying his umbrella tent. So when evening came, Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Lee found themselves on top of a mountain with nobody else around. They had left the crowd way behind. So Ajaan Fuang strung up his umbrella tent and they had to share the one tent that night. Ajaan Fuang gave his teacher a brief massage and then sat in meditation for a while. He thought of the passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the monk who is content just with his robes, his bowl, his basic requisites; and who—like a bird who wherever he goes—carries his wings as his only burden.

This contentment is a kind of wealth, a wealth that doesn't weigh you down. The wealth that comes from material things is heavy, both literally and emotionally. You've got all these ties and all these responsibilities. But if you can find happiness in just a few things, that kind of wealth is light. This is one of the reasons we go into the wilderness, to remind ourselves that we don't really need all that much—just some basic shelter, just enough food to keep going. If you can train the mind to be happy in a situation like that, that's genuine wealth. There's a real lightness that comes from being able to find happiness simply sitting here breathing. It means that your happiness is dependent on very few contingencies. The people with money, the people with investments, are the ones who have to read the newspapers every day to figure out what's safe, what's not safe out there in the world. But if your investment is in the skills of the mind, then no matter what the situation, you're secure.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about the sense of lightness—he calls it the emptiness—that comes from going out in wilderness and just having the perception of wilderness, dropping all your everyday concerns, the concerns of your family and society at large. Just realizing that you're in the wilderness, you're in the wild: There are no clocks, no timetables. And he recommends that you indulge in that perception of wilderness, that mental label that says "the wild," because that makes the concerns of human society seem very small, very far away.

Then, while you stick with that perception, not allowing your mind to stray back to issues with this person and that, you can see that a lot of the disturbances of social life fade away. The only disturbances remaining are those based on that perception of wilderness. In other words, there can be a great sense of ease, openness, lightness that comes from being out in the wild, but it's not entirely carefree. You still have to worry about your physical safety, about what you're going to get to eat, about what might want to eat you, all the issues

that come from identifying with this body, the survival of the body, in a very dangerous place. The mind in that situation is still not entirely free, still not entirely empty of disturbance.

So the Buddha goes on to recommend a more refined perception. In this case it's the element of earth. He says to think of "earth" without paying attention to its hollows and irregularities—just its earthness, like a hide that's stretched free of its wrinkles with a hundred pegs. Don't think of any particulars of earth, but just remember that everything around you, everything within the body, is all earth. And as far as you can think out in any direction, it's earth. Actually you can do the same with any of the other elements or properties as well: wind, fire, and water. Wind is the energy that permeates everything. Fire is the warmth; water, the coolness and cohesion. These perceptions apply inside your body and out. When you're not thinking of yourself as a being in wilderness, but just thinking of the body and what it has in common with everything around it, it blurs the distinctions.

First you blur the distinctions inside the body. So often we think of ourselves as a little spirit that inhabits the head, and the body is just a lump. But you want to create a sense of unity there as well. Remember that your head is earth, you've got bone all around it: the muscles and skull. You've got blood vessels, you've got blood in the vessels. All this material stuff here in the head is exactly the same as the material stuff down in the body. Think about that for a while. Try to maintain that perception, that mental label. There's no real distinction. What's up is the same as what's down. This is one of the applications of the bases of power: Up and down are basically the same. You've got blood in your head, you've got blood in your feet. The blood that's in your feet right now was in your head a little while ago. The blood that's in your head right now is in your heart, your intestines. It's all part of the same thing. Just keep that perception in mind to help erase any sense of distinction.

From there you spread it all around you. There's earth all around you, wind all around you. Fire, water: All of these properties stretch out in all directions. When you keep that perception in mind, the thought of being in wilderness seems coarse because that's always concerned with survival: where you're going to eat, what kind of shelter you're going to find. If you were out in the woods right now in the rain tonight, that would be a big issue: how are you going to keep warm? But if you just keep your mind on the perception "earth," then the question of your survival, the question of your comfort fades into the background. You can actually use the perception of fire to warm yourself up, or at least warm the mind up. You can think of the fire element permeating the whole body, not only around the skin, but down into the organs. The potential for warmth exists in everything. Sometimes using that label can accentuate that particular property, so the mind is less concerned about the chill of the rain outside.

What this shows you is the power of your perceptions. The way you perceive things can create disturbance in the mind or can drop the disturbance. That's an important lesson right there. Even just these thoughts of wilderness, thoughts of elements, are the beginning of the Buddha's teachings on how to induce a lack of disturbance in the mind. You go to more and more refined perceptions: from the physical properties, you go to infinite space; from space to infinite consciousness,

consciousness permeating everything; from there to nothingness; and then on to neither perception nor non-perception. And then to what the Buddha calls the themeless concentration of awareness.

At that point you've gone even beyond the notion of oneness. Oneness actually takes you only as far as the infinitude of consciousness. To get beyond that to nothingness you have to drop the thought of the oneness: in other words, the sense of one consciousness permeating everything. You go beyond the oneness, then you go beyond even any theme, any *nimitta* for the meditation at all. The Buddha's definition of *nimitta* doesn't have to do with seeing lights or hearing sounds. For him the *nimitta* of right concentration is the four establishings of mindfulness, the four *satipatthana*: body, feelings, mind states, mental qualities, in and of themselves. Yet there's even a state of concentration that doesn't focus on those themes at all. It's totally independent: No object whatsoever, but awareness is concentrated.

But even that, he says, is fabricated. When you realize that—that there is even an element of effort that goes into that, that it's inconstant, stressful, not-self—you can let go of that as well. That's when there's a true awakening. Even though emptiness has its gradations, awakening doesn't happen until you've totally let go of fabrication of all kinds.

The ability to do this starts with the ability to notice the power of your perceptions, what the mind is doing. In other words, you get into a state of concentration and at first you indulge in it, you enjoy it, based on the perception you've chosen. Then you step back a bit and look at it to see what disturbance is still there. You can get started on that process by going out in the wilderness and seeing the different effects of your perceptions when you're in the wilderness, and then when you're back in the monastery. For lay people, when you're here in the relative wilderness of Metta as opposed to your homes, that reflection gets you started in the right direction. You see that the problem of suffering is not anything "out there." It's largely in the way you perceive things, the way you fabricate things. And the process of meditation is a progressively refined understanding of that teaching—an understanding that goes deeper and deeper, gets more and more subtle, but it follows the same basic principle all down the line.

So learn to appreciate the power of these perceptions: wilderness as opposed to society, the elements as opposed to wilderness. Once you've hit the higher levels of emptiness, you look back on these early ones and see how crude they are. But you also appreciate them because they're useful in getting you to where you want to go. The more you're able to content yourself with little, keeping your possessions few, your responsibilities few, the better the situation you're in to observe these things, to learn from them, to discover wealth that's even greater than contentment, a wealth that's no burden at all.