

## *Inner Strength, Inner Wealth*

*March 30, 2012*

It's good to have a quiet place like this to meditate, where the people around you are practicing or at least trying to practice. It's a conducive environment.

But you can't restrict your practice only to places that are conducive, because we all have to encounter difficulties in our lives, we all have responsibilities. And it's especially important in the midst of our responsibilities to continue to practice the Dhamma.

There's a widespread misunderstanding that practicing the Dhamma means just meditation, but actually there's more to it. There's the practice of generosity, the practice of virtue, all the qualities that create strength in the mind and provide the mind with its wealth.

There are two lists that the Buddha gives: one of inner wealth, and the other of inner strengths. They're both useful to think about, especially as you're leaving the monastery and having to maintain your own momentum, maintain your own practice at home. There's some overlap between the two of them.

The strengths are five. The list starts with conviction—conviction that the Buddha really did know what he was talking about. He was awakened. He did find the end to suffering. He was able to show it to other people. And there have been people who've practiced that way and found the results. Regardless of culture, regardless of age, gender: It's largely the sincerity of their desire to approach the question of suffering in the most skillful way possible that they've been able to do it.

There was one passage where the Ananda says that you reflect on the fact, "There are others who have gained awakening. You tell yourself, 'They can do it. Why can't I?'" That, he said is a skillful use of conceit.

This is a lot of what the conviction does for you. It also reminds you that you have to keep the example of the Buddha in mind. There are so many other examples out there, so many other stories about how you can find happiness, with a very limited notion of what happiness is and often very little thought of the consequences.

There was a scary book out several years back on Positive Psychology where the author was trying to be very objective and scientific, saying that there are ways of finding happiness that are really immoral and yet as a true scientist you would have to recognize, Yes, people can find happiness in immoral ways.

But that's only looking at part of the story.

The Buddha himself pointed out there are people who get ahead by lying and killing and stealing, having illicit sex. But is getting ahead true happiness? What's the aftermath of that brief time of getting ahead and getting a position or getting wealth or whatever?

The story of the Buddha's life, his examples, his teachings on true happiness, give you a perspective that you've got to keep in mind. That perspective can energize you as you practice. This is why conviction is one of the forms of inner strength.

Built on that is your persistence: your willingness just to stick with it, stick with it. If you find yourself falling down, falling off the path, you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and just keep on going. You don't let yourself get discouraged.

There was a woman who'd be practicing with Ajaan Fuang many years. She had good powers of concentration but she said it seemed like it wasn't going anywhere even though she'd been meditating  $x$  number of years—I think at that point it was four or five. She complained to him about this one night, and he said, "Don't think about that. It's not the amount of time that matters. But as long as you're on the path, you're in the right spot."

And you can't draw a graph, expect the path to be always upward. There are going to be plateaus. We can't design the path ahead of time. We can't say, "I'd like a nice, short, quick, easy path." The way the mind develops along the path is a very individual matter. Some people develop quickly, other people develop slowly, but you can't compare yourself to other people's rate of time on the path. You've got your own path—and, after all, it is a matter of your own suffering based on your own habits.

Whatever complications you have, however long it takes to tease them out, that's not the issue. The issue is that you stick with it regardless—and that you learn how to talk yourself into sticking with it, that you have good ways of encouraging yourself to keep up the effort. That, too, is a strength.

Then there's the strength of mindfulness: the ability to keep all of this in mind, to remember the example of the Buddha and to remember how you can develop a desire to do what's skillful and to abandon what's unskillful. In other words, you keep in mind the lessons you've learned from others and you also keep in mind the lessons you've picked up from your own practice. You don't forget these things.

Mindfulness is also coupled with alertness: the ability to watch what's actually going on so that you can learn from it. In other words, you have to remember to be alert, to watch cause and effect in your own actions, and then to remember whatever lessons you've picked up and keep those in mind for the future. This, too, is a strength.

Built on these is the strength of concentration, the ability to get the mind to be really, really still. As the Buddha said, have respect for concentration. It's not something you just want to stick into the random free moments of your life. You have to give it some priority. Set aside some time for it. This is your time to be by yourself and to drop all your other outside responsibilities.

And regardless of whether the meditation goes well in a particular evening, you stick with it. You keep it up as a regular part of your day because you see that this is an important skill to develop. You're willing to give it that regularity: every day, every day, every day. That's how it develops momentum.

And keep in mind all the other issues that come around developing a skill: that there are going to be good times and bad times. If for some reason you don't have as much time to meditate as you normally would, at least give yourself *some* time. And remind yourself it's the quality that matters.

There was a period years back when I had to take a Dhamma exam in Thailand, and memorizing books of material in Thai was not easy. So I'd give myself little five-minute concentration breaks throughout the day. I'd remind myself, "I have to get the mind still right now because I've only got five minutes here."

There's that weird tendency we have when we have the luxury of an hour to let the mind gradually settle down like a glider, for fear that we'll get concentrated too fast and then we won't know what to do with ourselves for the rest of the hour. If you find you have that tendency, train yourself in these little five-minute meditation breaks. Get the mind really still and don't let it pick up the least little bit of other thoughts, other concerns.

After a while, when you find you can do this for five minutes and you like it, then it's a lot easier to do it for a full hour.

Then there's the strength of discernment, the ability to realize that you're carrying around a lot of unnecessary burdens in the mind. You look to see, "What's unnecessary here? Where am I causing myself stress that I really don't have to?" It could be the way you describe a situation to yourself, or the way that you keep thinking and thinking and thinking about something that's not getting clear. But if you recognize, okay, you're adding a lot of unnecessary stress to what's already there and you can recognize where it is, what you're doing that's causing it, then you can pare away a lot of your burdens that otherwise would keep you weighed down.

These are the strengths that keep your practice going even when you don't have a conducive environment around you.

As for your wealth, again that begins with conviction. The rest of the list sorts out some of the other implications of conviction.

The first one is virtue. You realize that your unskillful activities really do set up a barrier, provide an obstacle that you don't need. When you behave in a way that's unskillful, you're going to regret it for a long time.

You hear cases of people who, say, have been through a war, and a young person they killed totally randomly haunts them for the rest of their lives. They'd give any amount of money not to have the memory of having done that, to go back and be able to undo that mistake. But if you've got virtue, if you stick with your principles, then you don't have to suffer those memories. You've got something that money can't buy.

Sticking with your principles like this is strengthened by two qualities. The Buddha compares them to a moat and a road surrounding a fortress: They're shame and compunction.

The word "shame" has bad press here in the West. It'd be good to give it some good press. Shame here doesn't mean that you feel ashamed of yourself or that you think you're a bad person. It means that when you think about doing something that would be against your principles, you feel a sense of shame at the action. You realize that the action is beneath you. That helps to protect your virtue.

As does compunction, when you realize: What would be the results of doing something unskillful? There's going to be some suffering down the line. Why you want to add more suffering for yourself on top of what you've already got?

These four qualities go together. These are wealth in the sense that they give you a peace of mind that money can't buy. Someone comes up and offers you a million dollars to lie, and you say, "No, I feel that my precept is more valuable than that." That's when you've got the right set of values.

The next form of wealth is knowledge of the Dhamma, in other words having read a lot, having listened to a lot, not just so you can have a lot of concepts but because it often helps to have a lot of Dhamma principles in mind. You never know when you're going to need them and they'll come popping into your mind.

In my own case after Ajaan Fuang passed away, the very first year at the monastery there was a lot of conflict. I was dealing with a lot of problems. Things that he had said over the previous ten years would come into my mind right when I needed them. In fact, that was the basis for writing them down as the beginning of the book, *Awareness Itself*.

Just having heard those things, even though I hadn't intended to memorize them, I found that they were in some place in the mind and they were there to remind me when I needed these good lessons.

So it's helpful to remember what the Buddha said about things or what the ajaans said about things—again, to keep yourself in line with the principles of the

Dhamma. And to counteract all the other anti-Dhamma messages that are out there.

Another form of wealth is generosity: not only in the sense that when you're generous, things come back to you—in other words, the good things that go around come around—but also in the sense that the state of mind that comes with generosity is a large, wide-open state of mind. If you think about the needs of others and not just your own, and you see where you can help, there's a sense of self-worth that comes from that ability to have something to contribute to the well-being of others. And a generous mind, as I said, is wide-open: It's like living in a huge house rather than living in a narrow little garret. That breadth of mind is something you can't buy.

And finally there's wisdom, discernment. It's both a strength and a form of wealth.

The Buddha talks about discernment in pragmatic terms. For example, you know there's something that you like to do but is going to cause suffering down the line: You have the discernment to know how to talk yourself out of doing it. Or if there's something you don't like to do but you know is going to give good results, you have the discernment to talk yourself into doing it. You know how to psych yourself into doing the right thing.

A lot of discernment is just this: knowing your own mind, knowing what works, what doesn't work in getting it to practice. All the concepts that we tend to think about as being very esoteric Buddhist ideas—the teachings on the aggregates, the teachings on emptiness, the teachings on not-self—are actually all very pragmatic.

The aggregates, for instance: A good way to look at your mind is to try to think about the various activities of the mind that are involved in the way you feed, because the image of feeding is very central to the way the Buddha taught.

If you take the list of the aggregates, it may seem arbitrary: There's form, feeling, perception, fabrications and consciousness. You can probably think of lots of other ways of dividing up the activities of the mind. But these five are especially relevant to the way you feed, both physically and emotionally, intellectually.

Form would be, on the one hand, the form of your own body, which you need to keep going. Then there's the form of the things outside you want to eat or that offer themselves as possible food.

There's feeling: the feeling of hunger that drives you to look for food, and the feeling of fullness that comes when you've had enough. That's a huge motivation right there.

Then there's perception, perceiving the nature of your hunger: Is this thirst? Is

this hunger for something salty? Something sweet? You've got to learn how to read your own hunger and then read what's outside: What out there will satisfy your hunger? What out there is edible? Can you perceive the difference between what's edible and what's not?

This is a lot of what we learned as children: The things we put in our mouths were not always food, and we had to recognize that fact. As you grow up, you begin to recognize which kind of food is good for which kind of hunger.

Then there's fabrication: the way the mind talks to itself about how you're going to find the food. And once you've got it, what are you going to do with it? If you get a potato, can you eat it raw? Well, no, it's poisonous. You've got to cook it, you've got to do something with it.

Finally, there's the consciousness that's aware of all these things.

These are useful ways of looking at the mind, because then you can apply the same lessons to the way you feed the mind itself, not just the body. The sense of hunger in the mind for, say, companionship or the hunger for entertainment: Is this a hunger that you really want to go with? You may identify it, you perceive it as hunger for those things, but maybe it's something deeper that requires a better form of eating.

After all, the Buddha does present the path as a form of food for the mind to replace whatever unskillful activities you've been feeding on before.

Like when we're meditating right now: You've got the form of the body, so you learn how to inhabit it through the breath to develop feelings of pleasure. You hold on to that perception of breath. You think about it in ways that help ease any sense of dis-ease or discomfort in the body. That's the fabrication. Then there's consciousness.

Start looking at the mind in this way and you begin to understand a lot of its activities: the ways you were feeding yourself unskillfully, and now you learn to feed in a more skillful way. This is an extremely useful form of wealth because it helps to identify where the real problems are, so that you don't expend a lot of effort acting in unskillful ways and then getting nothing to show for it. We put out a lot of energy in our lives in dead-end activities. Having some discernment helps to prevent a lot of that wasted time.

So these are some of the forms of wealth you want to look for: inner strengths, the inner wealth. These are the things that keep your practice nourished, provide you with a sense of strength and well-being that can sustain the practice regardless of where you are.