

The Gift of Spiritual Materialism

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The Buddha called the qualities that we develop on the path *ariya-dhana*: noble treasures or noble wealth. And he was not at all shy about using financial analogies to explain the path, to explain the goal. The arahant, he said, is someone who's totally without debt, feeds off the alms of the country without debt, he says.

And the forest ajaans carry out this image as well. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about becoming an inner millionaire, and the state of mind that you gain with awakening as a Dhamma treasure.

So you hear nothing in the forest tradition about trying to get away from "spiritual materialism," away from trying to acquire anything in the practice. The ajaans, following the Buddha, are quite frank about the fact that you *want* to acquire good qualities, and that they are really valuable, really worth aspiring for.

Ajaan Lee has a nice statement. He says when you let go, you want to let go like a wealthy person and not like a pauper. The pauper doesn't have a Cadillac and he says, "I'll just let go of any desire to have a Cadillac." That's nothing compared to a wealthy person who has the Cadillac and is willing to let it go. Because there's a real Cadillac there, other people can benefit from it.

In other words, the good qualities you develop in the mind are not only for your own good. If you go down the list of noble treasures, you'll see that they spread their benefits around.

To begin with, there's conviction, virtue, shame, and compunction. These are all a set: You believe in the power of action, that the Buddha really was awakened and that his awakening depended on his own actions. You also are convinced that the qualities he developed to gain that awakening are qualities we all have in potential form. It's through our actions that we can foster them and bring them to that same level of skill, the same state of maturity.

Virtue grows out of that conviction. In your quest to be skillful, you don't want to harm anyone in any way. So you hold by the precepts – the five, the eight, the 227 precepts – as a way of making sure that you don't harm yourself, you don't harm others.

Shame and compunction are the emotions that keep you in line with those precepts. In other words, you would be ashamed to break the precepts, because you realize you're a better person than that. As for compunction, it's the opposite of apathy. Apathy says, "I don't care what happens down the line. I'm just going to go for what I want right now." Compunction cares. It says, "What happens down

the line is important, so I've got to be careful what I do right now. I can't just go by my immediate wants." These two qualities, shame and compunction, really are a form of wealth, because they protect you in so many ways from doing things that you would later regret.

Years back, I heard a radio interview with an old guy who'd been a soldier in Vietnam. Apparently, he'd killed a young girl during the war for no reason at all. And every night, the memory of the young girl kept haunting him. As he said to the interviewer, "If I could spend a million dollars to go back and undo that, I would do that, I would spend that much money." But of course, no amount of money can undo your past deeds. Which means if you have the shame and compunction not to do those things to begin with, it's worth more than a million dollars.

As for the remaining three noble treasures, they're learning, generosity, and discernment.

Learning is your knowledge of the Dhamma. Here, too, you're not the only one who benefits when you know the Dhamma. You can share it with others. At the very least, if you act in line with the Dhamma you've learned, other people will benefit.

Generosity is the way in which it's most obvious that other people benefit from your good qualities, because you're giving of material things, your time, your knowledge, your energy, your forgiveness. You're not just taking from the world, but you're giving good things back.

Finally, there's discernment, the treasure that protects all the others. What this means is this: As the result of the good karma of generosity, the good karma of virtue, you'll be reborn in really nice places and have a really good situation in life. But if you don't have discernment, you can take that goodness and abuse it. Discernment is what helps you see that even the goodness that comes from virtue and generosity is not enough. You need more. And as you develop that discernment, you're a good example to others. Your actions don't weigh on them, because you're able to see through your own greed, aversion, and delusion and *cut* it through. So other people aren't subjected to those things.

Now, there is a point on the path where you take all these noble treasures you've developed and you give them up. Even discernment is something that, at the very end of the path, has to be abandoned as well. As with all the factors of the path, discernment does its work and then you put it down. But that doesn't mean those things are not there. It's just that you don't have to hold onto them anymore. And they're there for you to share.

Think of the Buddha: all those good qualities he developed and he shared

them with everyone. For 45 years, walked all over Northern India sharing his wealth.

So don't be ashamed of hoping that you'll gain something from the practice. There's nothing wrong with spiritual materialism if you use the materials wisely. There are so many practice traditions out there that say that you shouldn't have any goals at all, you shouldn't aim at anything, just *be* in the present moment. That's letting go like a pauper. You have nothing and so you let it go. And it's still nothing. It doesn't take much to let go of nothing. But if you've got a really good treasure, it's quite an accomplishment to use it properly and then let it go.

So we're developing all these good things so that they'll do their work on our minds and will also leave something extra to give to the world. So when you're meditating tonight: Remember that it's for you and for others. What are you giving? What do you have to give? Put your mind in really good shape, so that the shape of your mind, the state of your mind, is something that you'd be happy to give to other people.

If you're sitting here wondering about what you're going to do tomorrow, wondering about what happened today, thinking about things that are not related to the breath, that's not much of a gift. Try to develop the state of mind that you'd be happy and proud to show to somebody else.

There are a couple of stories related to this point in the tales of the ajaans. A young monk comes to see the ajaan and talks about how he's been obsessed with sex and can't stop thinking about it. In one case the ajaan was Ajaan Chah, and in another it was Ajaan Thate. And in both cases their cure for that was to say, "Okay, tomorrow you can get up on the sermon seat and you can tell everybody in the community in great detail what your fantasies are." And in both cases it worked. The monks stopped thinking about those things.

So think of your state of mind tonight as a potential gift. Put it in good shape, something that you would be happy to give to others. Because in a way, we're giving our minds to everybody all the time. The state of our mind comes out in our actions, in our words. And so people are seeing and receiving your state of mind all the time.

So—without showing off—create inside you a really good state of mind. It'll show itself both inside and out, and people will find that it's a gift that they're happy to receive. The best gift you can give, of course, is the gift of a noble treasure. So make your mind into a noble treasure, and it'll spread its benefits all around.