

Noble Wealth

April 8, 2020

The Buddha talked quite unabashedly about developing treasures inside: the treasures of conviction, a healthy sense of shame, compunction, virtue, knowledge of the Dhamma, generosity, and discernment. He talked about them as a wise investment. This is very much unlike what we've heard in modern days about how bad it is to have an attitude of spiritual materialism, the idea that you're going to get something out of the practice or you're going to amass something in the course of the practice.

But then you look at the people who decried spiritual materialism and you can see that they were trying to deprive people of their sense of shame, their sense of self, their sense of accomplishment, their sense that they had worth to themselves. This was all very unhealthy. We do have worth, and our worth lies in the qualities of the mind. They can be developed, and it's good to think of them as things you amass.

This line of thinking starts with the development of merit. The Buddha talks about gaining huge amounts of merit, immeasurable amounts of merit, through having the right attitude toward giving, virtue, and developing thoughts of goodwill for all beings. This is all to the good because it gives us a sense that even though things of the world outside may be washed away—as we say in the chant: “The world is swept away”—there are good things in the mind that don't have to be swept away. We have the potential within us to develop them. As Ajaan Lee said, of the various noble treasures, discernment is the most valuable because discernment is what realizes where those potentials lie and how you can develop them.

Like right now: focusing on the breath. It's a small thing, focusing on the breath. How would you imagine that this would be the potential for developing discernment? Well, it comes from focusing on the breath in the right way.

There was one time when the Buddha told the monks that it would be good for them to practice breath meditation. One of the monks responded, “Oh, yeah, I practice breath meditation already.” This was a monk who didn't have that good a reputation among other monks or with the Buddha himself. So the Buddha asked him, “How do you practice breath meditation?” The monk replied, “I put aside all worries or concerns about the future, all memories of the past, and with equanimity, I breathe in and breathe out”—which sounds like the way breath meditation is taught a lot these days.

But the Buddha said, “There *is* that kind of breath meditation, I don't say there isn't, but it doesn't give the best results.” Here again, we're looking for

gaining results. And it's not bad to want to gain good results. There's a more productive way of looking at the breath.

You start by noticing differences between long breaths and short breaths, and you breathe aware of the entire body. In other words, you're taking the sense of pleasure that can come from finding the right breath to stay with, the right rhythm of breath, and you maximize it. As you're aware of the whole body, a sense of pleasure and ease comes spreading throughout the body. Then you calm bodily fabrication, in other words, the sense of the in-and-out breath. You allow it to grow still. You don't force it to grow still, but you allow it.

Now the Buddha uses the term *bodily fabrication* here. He could have simply said, "Allow the in-and-out breath to grow still." But he wants to start you thinking in terms of fabrication—what you're doing to shape your experience, right here, right now—because that's how you develop the discernment around just being with the breath.

Then he goes on to talking about breathing in a way to give rise to rapture, breathing in a way that gives rise to pleasure, breathing in and out sensitive to mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions—and then calming them. There again, you're working with potentials you have, and you're learning how to put them together in the right way so that they grow, they give results. Because the more you understand the principle of fabrication, the more you see ways in which you're shaping your experience right now, how you're doing it unskillfully, and how you can do it more skillfully. That develops your discernment even further.

So these noble treasures that we can develop inside start with very simple things. The raw materials are already there. You've got the body breathing, you've got the mind thinking and aware, and you can put those two things together in a way that grows wealth. You can invest them in an activity—you invest them in the process of meditation, so that you gain something of solid worth.

And we do this because we do want results. We don't sit here looking down the line for the long-term results all the time. We focus on what we're doing. Now, There are short-term results and long-term results. The short-term results you do look for, so that you can gain a sense of when you're wandering off, when the breath isn't quite right, or when the way you're focused isn't quite right. And you make adjustments.

But you realize that you're doing this not simply to become a good breather. You're doing it because it develops good qualities in the mind. You develop the mindfulness that's going to help you remember the lessons you've learned, and you develop the discernment to see things clearly—in particular, to see what you're doing right now that's shaping your experience.

Because those instructions for breath meditation involve bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, mental fabrication. The verbal fabrication lies in what you're telling yourself you're going to do. As you learn how to see things in these terms, you're preparing yourself for the insights that will go deeper and deeper. Because as the Buddha discovered, there is a big problem if you want to put an end to suffering. The cause of suffering is the kind of craving that leads to becoming: taking on an identity in a world of experience. But the problem is that not only does craving for becoming cause becoming, but craving for non-becoming—i.e., destroying the becomings already there—that leads to more becoming, too.

The way out of this dilemma is to look for the fabrications that you use to create states of becoming and develop dispassion for them before they become states of becoming. That way, you don't have to think about destroying anything that's already there. It'll end on its own. That's how you get around the dilemma.

So the Buddha wants you to look at your experience right here, right now, in terms of fabrication, so that you can begin to see the ways in which you create states of becoming, and you can develop dispassion for the raw materials as they appear. And you do that where? Right here at the breath. Right here with the feelings and the perceptions around the breath.

The raw materials for your inner treasures, your noble treasures, are right here, and they're very simple. It's just a matter of learning how to put them together in the right way. That's how they develop, that's how they grow, that's how they become your wealth that you can depend on.

So as we look around us in the world and we see how things are falling away, falling away—they're getting swept away, and we'll be seeing how the economy gets swept away—you want your inner economy to stay solid. And you have to realize that that's where your true wealth lies. Because the things of the world belong to the world. You can't take them with you. Even while you're here, you can't keep them all the time. You can't say, "All this wealth that I've gained, that's in my bank account, is going to be mine forever until I die." All kinds of things can happen to make it worthless.

But the wealth of conviction, the wealth of discernment, and all the other forms of noble wealth, will never become worthless. So that's where you should invest your time. That's where you should invest your energy and all the discernment you can muster. The raw materials are here. As I said, they're very simple. We all have them. We all have what it takes. It's simply a matter of putting them together with the right determination and in the right way.