

# Buddhism and Wealth

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Buddhism teaches an entire way of life, how to lead our lives in practical ways that can be applied to all aspects of our life, social, political, economic and educational, and thus to live peacefully together in society. The Buddha, as the supreme teacher, has shown us the way to free ourselves from suffering, revealing a path leading to peace and happiness.

The Noble Eightfold path is the fundamental teaching that points out the right way to all living beings, without any distinction or discrimination. Here we discuss the right use of wealth and how it leads to both material and spiritual progress in this world and in the world to come.

We all know that sound economics plays an important role in our lives. To lead a successful life it is necessary to have sufficient money to meet our needs. Poverty for householders is considered to be a cause of suffering, and also the cause of immorality and crimes such as theft, lies, violence, and corruption. It can result in ill-health, shorten one's life, and can even lead to destruction of the environment.

The Buddha was concerned not only with spiritual matters, but also with the economic happiness and progress of people. In the early Pali Scriptures, the Buddha explains a balanced and right way of earning and protecting money, and how one can use it both for the benefit of oneself and others. In order to achieve both spiritual and economic progress one should be intelligent and wise. In this process one has to dissociate from low persons and associate with wise ones. The Buddha emphasised that the possession of wealth should lead towards a pure life based on moral and spiritual principles. The accumulation of wealth should be regarded as a means to an end (spiritual progress) and not an end in itself.

Guidelines for the best acquisition and use of wealth in ordinary family life are found in the *Anathapindikovada Sutta* of the *Anguttara Nikaya*. Here four kinds of happiness was explained to Anathapindika, a great banker and one of the Buddha's most devoted lay disciples. He founded the celebrated Jetavana monastery at Savatthi, for the Buddha.

The first happiness according to this *sutta* is to enjoy economic security or sufficient wealth acquired by just and right means (*atthisukha*). Economic stability is one of the factors necessary for a successful lay life. Having sufficient wealth is essential for progress in the world. Happiness is derived when the income has been earned honestly, by hard work and one's own effort. Something well done brings about a feeling of satisfaction. Wealth should not be acquired by dishonest or fraudulent means, exploiting or cheating other people.

In the *Sigalaka Sutta* the Buddha advises us to earn wealth without causing harm and pain to others. He gives the example of bees which create a lot of honey by collecting small quantities of pollen from flowers, without harming their

appearance and at the same time generating new life to the flowers. On another occasion the Buddha said we need to refrain from the five kinds of harmful trades. These trades are those dealing in arms (*sattha vanijja*), in human beings (*sattuwanijja*), in flesh (*mamsavanijja*) i.e. breeding animals for slaughter, in intoxicating drinks and drugs (*majjavanijja*), and in poison (*visavanijja*). In modern times we could include in this category films and videos that corrupt by encouraging violence and excessive sense pleasures, pornographic literature, and prostitution.

All this has a damaging effect on the younger generation, who are the next adult generation. Intoxicants result in serious harm to both the body and mind of individuals, their families and associates. The sale of weapons makes manufacturers and traders rich at the expense of thousands of human beings.

The second happiness is *bhogasukha* - the bliss of wealth - which means spending liberally on oneself, one's family, friends and relatives, and on meritorious deeds, the wealth which has been honestly acquired. It is not the pleasure of possession, the accumulation of money and hoarding it, but the spending of it which brings satisfaction.

Thirdly, there is *ananasukha* - the bliss of not being in debt - this is when the layman is free from debt. One experiences this happiness, thinking that one has no debt, great or small, to anyone.

The fourth happiness is to live a faultless and pure life without committing evil in thought, word or deed. This is called *anavajjasukha* or the bliss of blamelessness. It must be noted here that the first three of these are economic, but the last one brings the greatest happiness.

When a person does no harm to himself or others, and is generous in many ways, what greater riches could there be?

This advice is particularly relevant in the present-day materialistic society, where peace, generosity and happiness are in short supply. To acquire wealth "by energetic striving, by the strength of one's arms, by the sweat of one's brow" is the right way of earning, and it is wholly suitable to use this wealth not only for one's own consumption but to share with others as well.

There are four deeds necessary to do this:

1. To make oneself happy and pleased, and to maintain this happiness
2. Similarly for one's parents
3. Also for one's wife and children, servants and workers
4. And lastly to make one's friends and colleagues happy and pleased, and to maintain them in happiness

So the Buddha acknowledges that if we wish to lead a successful life, it is necessary to have a certain quantity of money earned by right means without harming others. There are some people who have wealth they have inherited from

parents or relatives. There are other who earn by practising an occupation or profession, utilising their intelligence and abilities. Regardless of the way in which one acquires wealth, it is important to maintain a balance between income and expenditure.

The Buddha went into detail about saving money and spending it. He explained to the young man, Sigalaka, how a wise man should spend his income - one fourth of his income should go on his daily expenses, he should invest half in his business, and he should put aside one fourth for emergencies. This is very good advice to enable one to lead a happy life and to make the best use of one's money. Some people do not use their money well. There are people who waste their money on useless activities and get into debt. Some dissipate wealth on intoxicating drink, drugs, frequenting unseemly places at unseemly hours, and on excessing sensual pleasures, amusements and gambling.

Of the two purposes of earning wealth, to give to others and to consume by oneself (*Dhanam daanaaya bhuktaye*), the first - to give to others - is more meaningful than just to fill one's own discontented belly. To achieve this contentment at any stage in our lives, one should make five types of offerings, namely: to relatives (*natibalim*), guests (*atithibalin*), ancestors (*pubbapetabalim*), to the king (*rajabalim*) and to the *devas devata balim*).

According to the ancient literature, if you have little, you should give little; if you have a middling amount, you should give a middling amount; and if you have much, then you should give much. But it is not fitting not to give at all. Hoarding wealth never brings happiness but only sorrow and disappointment and sometimes even the unexpected destruction of your precious life. The Buddha defines a person who hoards wealth and is excessively greedy as a miser.

He did not approve of any kind of hoarding of wealth. The miser's wealth is like a lake which demons haunt. In the *Dhammapada* the Buddha points out the foolishness of taking pride in possession. He explains that if one feels - "I have children, I have wealth," these are the empty claims of an unwise man. If he cannot call himself his own - how then can he claim children and wealth as his own?

At the same time, the Buddha admired thrift as a very good quality and pointed out that to waste our wealth is wrong. He emphasised that generosity is a desirable quality. The Buddha gave advice to kings and leaders. When rulers imposed excessive taxes, he was deeply concerned about this. He directed the king and his ministers to conduct their economic affairs without harming their subjects. Of the ten qualities required for leadership, the very first he named is *Dana*, giving. This important advice applies to all of us. As stated previously, we should share whatever we have with others.

Our wealth is not for ourselves alone. This is not a matter of money only. There is so much we can share - we can share our time and effort, give friendship to those around us, share our knowledge, and give freely of whatever riches we possess. We share our ability to make the life of others lighter, give pleasure and share the gift of laughter, use our talents and abilities in many ways. This wealth, which cannot be measured in pounds, rupees, dollars or any other currency - of which you may not have

much, is of the greatest value. The greatest wealth and the highest giving is that of the *Dhamma*. The *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* refers to how the use of wealth can influence the decline of society. According to this *Sutta* the erroneous and wrongful distribution of wealth can increase and spread poverty, it causes the right and disciplined way of life to decline, and virtuous living decreases.

On the other hand, if a person uses his wealth properly and wisely and follows the noble path, it brings benefit for both themselves and others. A beneficial way of earning means people follow a right means of livelihood which gives happiness here and hereafter. This is called *samma ajjiva* and is one of the steps on the noble path.

The Buddha said - Health is the greatest gain,  
Contentment is the greatest wealth  
Trust is the greatest friend  
*Nibbana* is the greatest happiness.

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