



The Splendid Palace

It's not wealth and power that enslave people, but the clinging to wealth and power.

Siddhartha Gautama

A ZEN MASTER NAMED RYOKAN lived simply, passing his days in a modest hut at the foot of a mountain.

One night, a thief broke into his hut, but finding nothing to steal, he turned to leave, whereupon he encountered Ryokan returning from one of his long walks on the mountain.

“You’ve come a long way,” Ryokan said to the startled thief, “so you really shouldn’t leave empty-handed... Here, please take the clothes I’m wearing as a gift.” Bewildered by this unexpected kindness, the thief took the clothes and hurried away.

Afterward, Ryokan sat serenely under the full moon, wearing nothing. “Poor fellow,” he said to himself, “I only wish I could have given him this beautiful moon.”

Many people assume that because Buddhism—and perhaps especially, Zen—values simplicity, humility, and generosity, that it is therefore an anti-materialistic philosophy, eschewing wealth and possessions in favor of spiritual austerity.

After all, the Buddha of legend gave up the lavish, lazy life of a wealthy prince to live in poverty on his search for spiritual enlightenment, and monks in the Buddhist monastic tradition are typically portrayed eking out the barest of material existences, subsisting on the alms of passing strangers.

But that is not the real point of austerity, nor the right lesson to be taken from the story of Ryokan. While Ryokan lives simply, he offers his clothes to the thief hoping that his act of compassion will help to enlighten the thief as to where real, lasting happiness lies: not in material things but in inner peace and equanimity.

After the thief departs, Ryokan sits contentedly under the moon, feeling a deep connection to nature's beauty, which is free to all, wishing he could give the thief the inner peace which he has found for himself.

While material possessions do not define Ryokan's richness of spirit, he could just as well be adorned in princely robes and living in a palace, because he is free of the *attachment* to material things that is the real source of suffering, not things themselves.

No matter what our lifestyle or level of wealth may be, we all have equal access to this timeless wisdom, and the inner joy and satisfaction that comes from possessing it.

We live in a profoundly materialistic society—dependent on an economic system which requires constant, ever-expanding growth—which is thus ceaselessly trying to seduce us into believing that fulfillment can only come in the endless search for the next shiny object, experience, or person.

The story of Ryokan reminds us that the quest for wealth and temporary, outward security is fine, as long as it doesn't come at the expense of our inner, spiritual growth, the source of lasting happiness and security.

It also gently reminds us that no matter the extent of our material wealth or where we are stationed in life, we are surrounded by riches. No one can steal the moon, which shines equally on rich and poor alike, provided we only have the eyes to see it.

A passage from the writings of Nichiren, a 13th century Buddhist philosopher priest, states, "One becomes aware of the Buddha vehicle within oneself and enters the palace of oneself." Through our spiritual practice, we mend the places in our life where the roof leaks or the draft enters, and gradually build and maintain a joyful, serene inner self that is like a strong and splendid palace.

Nichiren goes on to say, "Hungry spirits perceive the Ganges River as fire, human beings perceive it as water, and heavenly beings perceive it as *amrita* (immortality).

He is saying that material things like money are inherently neither good nor bad, but take on good or bad qualities depending on how we perceive and make use of them.

This is often called 'Right Livelihood,' part of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path. Acquiring money in a way that causes suffering to others or to ourselves is certainly bad, but using it to support our modest needs or a worthy cause is not.

How we obtain and use money and the other resources available to us will depend on what is in our hearts: whether anger and greed or compassion and a sense of generosity toward others. If we do not have positive qualities in our hearts, it is far better to work on changing ourselves than to pursue any degree of wealth or power.

It is difficult to develop inner strength and calmness if one is hungry or constantly facing concerns about material security. Neither can one practice generosity toward others if living in poverty or squalor.

It is telling, however, that even after the Buddha attained enlightenment, he continued to live with only the most basic and necessary of material possessions.

This suggests that while accumulating wealth and things are not necessarily harmful, being overly focused on them can tend to impede our spiritual wellbeing.

Perhaps the best course is to pursue a 'Middle Way' between materialism and asceticism, so that we fulfill—as one wise man said—"our needs, but not our greeds."

After all, no matter how much or how little we may possess, our greatest wealth is inner peace and contentment. ■