

Satsang with Sri Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
Vedic view of Wealth

Question

What does our religion believe about acquiring wealth?

Answer

Artha and *kāma* are two of the four *puruṣārthas* or human ends talked about in the Vedic culture. *Artha* means wealth. In addition to money, it also includes power, recognition, fame, etc. It is considered to be a valid human objective. It is accepted that every human being has a desire for wealth, recognition, and power. Every human being also has a desire for *kāma*. *Kāma* means pleasure and sense gratification. These desires are well recognized.

Our view is that the wealth should be acquired through legitimate means. It is quite alright to acquire wealth because the desire for wealth is natural. It gives us a sense of security. Money gives us a sense of security because we are concerned about what will happen to us in the future. Therefore, there is a need to have a sufficient amount of money to secure our present as well as our future, so that we may fulfill our responsibilities and duties. In addition, the performance of rituals was very common in the Vedic times, for which resources were necessary. Therefore, wealth has always been considered to be a necessity. Similarly, power and recognition give us security and, at the same time, also gratify our egos. Ego-gratification is another need of the human being. As long as the gratification or nourishing of the ego is through legitimate means, acquiring wealth is fine. As long as I nourish my ego, and I am not nourished or controlled by it instead, acquiring wealth is fine.

In addition, acquiring wealth can enable us to give to those who are needy. *Dhānam* or charity is looked upon a virtuous act to be performed by every human being, particularly the householder. We require wealth to do charity. Therefore, acquiring wealth through legitimate means is quite acceptable.

Wealth always tempts a person. In the Kaṭhōpanishad [1-1-27], there is a statement, *na vittena tarpaṇīyo manuṣyaḥ*, a human being can never be satisfied with wealth. Wealth, whether it is money, power, or recognition, can never give satisfaction. The more I have, the more I want. Wealth presents a tremendous

amount of temptation. Sometimes my desire for wealth is so great that I may even compromise or violate the values. Whenever I am prompted or controlled by greed, it is likely that the values or legitimate means would be violated. Therefore, our scriptures say that one should avoid greed. The Īśāvāsyaopaniṣad [1] says, *mā gṛdhaḥ kasyasviddhanam*, may you not covet anybody's wealth.

Wealth is to be respected. As Pujya Swami Dayanandaji would say we look upon wealth as Lakshmi. If we happen to step on a rupee note or dollar bill on the floor, we always seek its pardon because we look upon that as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.

Question

Isn't wealth necessary for being happy?

Answer

It depends upon our definition of success. If we define success as having wealth, the lack of wealth implies a lack of success. However, if we define success as inner satisfaction, being successful need not be equated with having wealth. Wealth is necessary to fulfill our basic needs and responsibilities. But wealth by itself cannot ensure our happiness. One of the most important things for being happy is having the inner clarity or tranquility of mind. We can be happy even if we do not have wealth. Happiness has no relationship to wealth. We can be happy or unhappy whether or not we have wealth. Happiness depends upon what we are, not what we have. Of course, wealth does give us some comfort and power. If we equate wealth with success, it gives us a certain amount of self esteem; that is fine. But other than that, wealth as such cannot provide happiness. Nothing by itself can give us happiness; happiness is but a state of mind. If we live intelligently, and abide by the values so that life becomes a process of inner growth, our lives can be the means to happiness.

Question

How should one go about defining the basic requirements?

Answer

Well, we have a body and there are certain basic requirements of the body such as hunger and thirst. The body needs to be protected from heat, cold, rain, sun etc. We need food, shelter, and clothes. In the United States, we need transportation. We perhaps even need a means of communication such as a

telephone. Each one of us has to define our own minimum requirements to sustain the body and carry out our interaction with the world.

For example, you require a vehicle for transportation. You will have to decide what vehicle you require. Is it a vehicle satisfying the need for transportation or is it a means of pride? Are you buying a reliable car or a flashy one to satisfy your ego? Very often, many things that we acquire are meant to satisfy our ego and to make us feel equal to or better than someone else. These things are not at the level of minimum needs. They are the needs of the ego. Only the needs of the body and the needs for fulfilling one's responsibility can be called basic needs.

We have to ask ourselves why we want something. I want food alright, but why do I want a particular kind of food? Wanting clothes is fine, but, why a particular kind of clothing? A car is fine, but why a particular kind of car? Yes, you can perhaps have a justification for an expensive car. I am not saying that an expensive car is not a need just because it is expensive. But we ourselves can be the judge of what it is that prompts us to do a given thing. Is it my basic need that prompts me or is it, instead, an emotional need that prompts me? An emotional need is satisfied when I feel good because my house is big, or because my car is better than someone else's, or even because my clothes are all name brand clothes. If we are committed to the idea of living a simple life, we will learn the extent of our minimum requirements in course of time. If we have a commitment to that, we will learn to adjust our needs accordingly.

Question

Swamiji you said one can be happy without the trappings of material success. Does that mean that if one's basic needs are met, one should be happy? But is that teaching not a deterrent to the pursuit of material success? Should one try to be happy with the minimum and therefore not try to attain material success?

Answer

You cannot 'try' to be happy with yourself. To be happy is not something to be desired; it is to be discovered. When you find that you are happy being with yourself you become free from having any other needs. In living an intelligent and mature life, we are slowly creating a mindset that becomes more and more self-sufficient or discovers satisfaction with itself. It is not that you can be happy with or without wealth. Your happiness does not depend upon anything other than you. Yes, there may be a certain need for ego-gratification, and for that

success may be necessary. To a certain extent, some accomplishments are necessary for your self-esteem, so that you to feel good about yourself. Material success becomes necessary in order for most people to discover self-esteem; other than that, it has no significant contribution. The way to be happy is to live a life of values intelligently and with emotional maturity.

Question

Isn't there a contradiction between being happy with just the basic needs being fulfilled and the pursuit of greater material success?

Answer:

Sure, you can pursue greater material success. If you have the abilities and opportunities, do pursue it. As far as your own personal needs are concerned, however, keep them to a minimum. Ensure that you consume less and make more available to the needy. That will be an excellent way of looking at material pursuits. You can acquire as many material possessions as possible. God has given you the capacity and therefore, use it. Our own life should be as simple as possible so that we are as independent as possible. You can then use the wealth that you have properly and in whichever way you think fit. You can become a contributor to the society. The more wealth you have, the more you can contribute. So the pursuit of wealth, name, and fame is entirely acceptable. All of these can be great assets; in order to help somebody, you must have wealth, name, or fame. Let us acquire them through legitimate means. Let us not get corrupted by them. We should keep our requirements as simple as possible. In India, we find many people of the earlier generation who were once very poor and later became very wealthy. We can see how they were very simple in their personal life and at the same time contributed a lot to charity. As the popular saying goes, we should aspire for 'simple living and high thinking'¹.

¹ Transcribed by Chaya Raj. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.