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# MONEY AND MORALITY: *Gifts of eternal truth in moments of the mundane*

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As inhabitants of this 21st century Western world, we all have to deal with money. We participate in the world of commerce as a means to obtain those things considered necessities of life. Money plays the role of the most commonly accepted means in this giving and getting from others. And the more money one has, the greater one's power to regulate the particulars of survival – one's own and that of others.

We use money to participate in the exchange of products or services, individually and corporately – whether employed by or leading an organization. In some cases these organizations are publicly funded non-profits, and in other cases they are private, for-profit ventures.

Money and morality is a topic that has surfaced on many occasions in my line of work. One such instance was during a contract with CBC TV to work on the development of a six-part national series titled: "Beautiful, Filthy Money and the Search for Soul." The title itself speaks to the ambivalent nature of our responses to money and its presence in our lives. As part of the contract, I appeared as a guest on the panel, where I was asked to complete the following sentence: "Money is..." Yes, what is money?

My response was: Money is a tool for finding out who we really are. What you do with money, and how you live with money's presence in your life, tells a lot about your values. Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it: "A dollar is not value, but representative of value, and, at last, of moral values." This is apparently pretty close to what Buddhists believe about money.

There are times when many of us are faced with an imbalance between money and morality and find ourselves asking in some form or another: How we can put "Money" and "Morality" in the same sentence and not end up with an ethical contradiction?

The incompatibility of these M-words is an inherent, yet complex part of being human. And it is only when we face the truth of their incompatibility that we can come to understand the utter necessity of their co-existence. The challenge stems from the fact that there is both a spiritual side and a material side to our situation. When we don't bring the spiritual side into dialogue with the material side, problems result.

This is true for individuals as well as organizations. Think about Enron – what do you think their way of dealing with money says about the moral values that guided senior management there? Each of us could turn the question on our own lives.

Money, in and of itself, is neutral. It has no intrinsic value, but is a mere yardstick of value, a means of measuring or comparing in the exchange of one thing for another. Money "belongs to the class of great mental inventions, known as measures..."<sup>1</sup>

Measures of distance – the meter or mile – span the gulf between two things or places yet are not themselves things or places. Similarly, money brings things of different value together without becoming one or the other." Because money is merely a way of measuring, it is in itself, therefore, not real. Thus, money is both neutral and unreal.

Nevertheless, we often seem oblivious to this unreal nature of

money and equate it with things that are very real, like our own values. But if, as Aristotle says, "[a]ll things that are exchanged must be somehow comparable,"<sup>2</sup> what are we saying about our perception of reality when we measure our sense of self-worth by our net-worth?

While money is a measure of value, that value can change depending on what the market is willing to bear. It's rather similar to the story of the emperor's new clothes. As soon as we agree something no longer has value, our whole perception of it changes. This change in the perception of the value of something affects humans psychologically and emotionally. So when the value of stocks falls through the floor, people react in fear or paranoia. Conversely, when stocks rise like crazy, there is frenzy fuelled by hope and even greed.

What then, motivates our relationship with money? With what intention do we strive to accumulate wealth? Do we recognize what our relationship with money says about our values?

## Money Obsessing

For some the question of ethics and money leads down another path. In "Is Lucre Really that Filthy?"<sup>3</sup> Craig Cox, executive editor of *Utne* magazine, reflects on his own journey from disdain for the almighty dollar as a child of the 60s to becoming – of all things – "bourgeois," earning money and learning to manage it. There was the example by a leading voice of the counter-culture of the day, Allen Ginsberg, who wrote in *Howl!* of burning all his money in a wastebasket. Times have changed – even for Ginsberg,

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1. David Appelbaum, "Money and the City," *Parabola*, Volume XVI, No. 1 (Spring 1991), 40.

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1133a 18.

3. Craig Cox, "Is Lucre Really That Filthy," *Utne Reader* (July-August, 2003), 63.

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who "...of course, sold his papers to Stanford University for nearly a million bucks."<sup>4</sup>

The irony, points out Cox, is that social justice activists who want to eschew wealth in order to bring about social justice and help the poor are in fact helping people to attain the very thing they, the activists, abhor: a comfortable life. He sets up an interesting dilemma when he insists that "If you insist on embracing poverty in your own life, how do you become a credible advocate for folks who would do almost anything to escape it?"<sup>5</sup>

True enough, there are those who become enslaved to money in their attachment to mere accumulation of more and more capital. However, there are also those who are enslaved to money in their ascetic avoidance of it. Both are obsessive behaviours: obsessed with having money or obsessed with avoiding it – like the alcoholic's family that is obsessed with avoiding alcohol. In neither case is money at the service of the individual as a means of providing for the necessities of life; rather, the individual is at the service of money.

Our emotional responses to this neutral thing called money often lead to an automatic attachment of value-statements. We grab on to labels such as "evil," "bewitching," "awe-inspiring," or "filthy lucre." Respect for money is replaced with either worship or condemnation of it.

Emotional and value-laden responses are also evident when conversation turns towards money and self-righteous posturing rises very quickly to the surface with comments like: "Well, I don't soil my hands with money." Or: "I certainly don't

work for money." A lot of judging of others happens: "He's just in it for the money." Or: "She'd do anything for money."

This judgmental posturing also leads to ideological positioning. Anyone who focuses on making money is immediately dubbed a capitalist and conversely, anyone who speaks of communal sharing is dubbed a socialist. Subtleties are lost and conversation ends right there. No dialogue is possible. We move from love of money to love of ideology, where anyone who thinks differently than I do about money is immediately evil.

### **Spiritual Moments of Mundane Existence**

To judge from one side or the other is to forget that we inherently have one foot in heaven and one foot in the mud of the earth below. The challenge is to live in both simultaneously. Living as a human being means learning to deal with money – whether one has a lot or a little matters not.

It will do us no good to merely pursue a spiritual life unless we are living equally and simultaneously in the material world. Christians are exhorted to remember that even Bishops, or spiritual leaders, are told to balance both. "For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:5)

A life of wholeness, or one in which the spiritual and the material are in balance, guarantees freedom from distortion. Yet the need for wholeness is also at the heart of the contradiction. The spiritual and the material are of entirely different natures. Not only must they live in the same world, both the spiritual and the human sides of our existence must also have

their own identity and remain in full relationship with each other.

We have to work at accepting this incompatibility for what it is. These are separate parts of who we are and of our daily existence. These separate parts are in a dynamic relationship one to the other, like notes in a beautiful song: you might have harmony, but you still have separate notes. If they are all the same note, there is not harmony, there is unison. Harmony has tension. It is beautiful because of the tension. Unison is nice, but harmony is richer.

### **Morality And Business**

Just as it will not help us on an individual level to focus only on the one side of our nature at the expense of the other, likewise it will not help to divide our culture into the spirit-lead and others. It reminds me of a story I recently heard: Two men met for the first time, in of all places, a church on a Sunday morning. The one asked the other: "So what do you do?" To which the second responded: "I work as a director of XYZ division of a business." "You're in business?" quipped the first, who was a teacher, "Oh that's too bad."

The work of the businessman was seen as inherently less worthy. How far could the conversation go after that? It is a difficult chasm.

One finds a classic case of a religious-affiliated venture that refused to acknowledge that it must run itself like a business. After decades of mismanagement, the publishing house cried out to its constituency to get it out of a multi-million debt. One former board member was even quoted in a church publication as saying that this was seen as "a church venture, not a business venture."

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4. Ibid

5. Ibid

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The mistake lay in this either-or posture. There was no acknowledgment that gifts and talents and skills of different sorts were needed.

The disdain goes the other way too. One has only to think of the now infamous corporations like Enron or Livenet, where the situation is merely the reverse: a business enterprise that lacks spiritual sense, and results in moral bankruptcy.

If our moral principles give us the framework within which we operate and the ability to continue operating depends upon financial viability, then integrity is automatically lost for any organization when either half of the morality and money equation is lost.

### **Balancing the Equation**

Only when we pay attention and only when we come to recognize the true place and role we have allowed money in our lives, only then can we possibly hope to reach a deeper understanding of how important a balance between the material and the spiritual is. This deeper understanding may only come in flashes, only fleetingly. Yet the truth that is understood in an instant opens us up to the truth of our everyday actions and existence. In other words, we must become conscious, we must become aware of our human condition – this life lived in a dynamic balance between

the spiritual and the material – and be attentive to both.

But instead of giving the right amount of attention to those mundane and material aspects of life like taxes and monetary demands put upon us, we often get caught in a bias against money. We would rather point fingers and condemn in broad strokes than engage in dialogue of particular money matters. We would rather alienate than seek to understand.

Instead of casting judgment or pretending we, personally, are above being affected by money, we need to face our human situation and recognize we live in two worlds simultaneously. Maybe then we would do a better job of living in both. “If great truth does not enter into our relation to money, it cannot enter our lives.”<sup>6</sup> And if we do not allow ourselves to face that truth, the negative aspects of our relationship to money will sneak up on us unawares. Bad debts, overdue bills, or an empty fridge will suddenly demand so much of our human attention that we will have no energy left to focus on matters of the spirit.

Undeniably, it can be a challenge to live out our moral principles in the marketplace; it is inherent in the challenge of being spiritual and human at the same time. Not giving enough attention to either the spiritual or the material, on an individual or an organizational level, leads to

bankruptcy, whether moral or financial.

In his book, *Business and the Buddha*, Dr. Lloyd Field states, “greed is a choice.” We can choose to allow our insatiable desires to form our intentions or we can choose to recognize where our intentions are ultimately leading us. It is not money or wealth or even the capitalist system that is the problem, he argues. Buddhists regard wealth as neither bad nor negative. Rather, the problem sits plainly with us, human beings, and the intentions which we allow to motivate our thoughts, our emotions and our actions.

It cannot be stated any clearer than said in this book: we are exhorted to “continually make the connection between money and human values.”

And then the question that really gets to the heart of the matter: “What price do we put on our ethics?”

We will need to move past our biases and disdain for those whom we consider to be on the other side of the money and morality equation and allow moments of eternal truth and even grace to infiltrate our discussions and our questions. When all gifts and skills are welcome and when integrity is our priority, then there will be the possibility of a true and dynamic relationship between money matters and morality.