

## Wealth and Poverty

by Scott Teitsworth – late 1980s

If you keep an open mind, occasionally you learn something new. Once, many years ago, I was taking a class from a wise old Indian philosopher. Everyone in the class shared at least one common belief: that America was fabulously rich and India untouchably poor. (This was back in the Seventies, before Reagan's revolution has in fact bankrupted the country.) At one point during the lecture this fellow said, "America is a very poor country, while India is incredibly rich." The statement shocked us to the point of outrage. What could this guy be talking about?!

"In America, you have so much money and material goods," he went on. "But your attitude is one of extreme poverty. You all hold out your hands and cry and whine that you don't have enough, that no one is doing anything for 'me, me, me.' You are like the worst kinds of beggars. No amount of material opulence will satisfy you." We shifted uncomfortably in our seats—perhaps a lot of us matched that description. Many of us were always complaining without helping, taking without giving, filled with unwarranted desperation for...what? We were like lost children trapped in adult bodies, still crying for their parents to come and comfort them.

"In India we have few material goods, but we are nonetheless rich. If you are hungry, the poorest person will share his last crust of bread with you. So many people will offer you a place to sleep, clothes to wear; they will walk with you to show you to your destination. They don't ask if you're a member of a particular sect or religion or political party, they deal with you as a human being. Their arms are always open in trust and friendship, no matter whether they have a lot or a little to give. That is real wealth. That is how truly rich people behave." Many of us hung our heads in shame. Right there a resolve was born in us to change our attitudes, to replace our impoverished sense of ourselves with an outlook of calm contentment and fearlessness—in other words, of

psychological wealth. Looking back to that class, I see it as a most important step in gaining maturity, in becoming an adult in the actual sense, as opposed to what passes for adulthood in our manifestly immature society.

“Many of you are standing there holding out your cup and crying and begging to have it filled. But grace is showering us on all sides. The universe is fabulously rich. The problem is that you are holding your cup upside down. You have only to turn your cup upright, and the many blessings this life is full of will fill it to the brim over and over again. Thank you.” The professor strode off the stage, leaving us rooted to our chairs, pondering and pondering again.