Wise Strategies

December, 2002

This afternoon we had the question about wisdom as a translation for paññā. The sermon might be a better meeting, in the sense of seeing differences, perceiving things clearly that you might have missed otherwise. But there’s another meaning for paññāna text, which comes down to strategy, having good strategies for dealing with problems in the mind. For instance, we’re practicing concentration. There’s a strategy here. You almost might say it’s a political strategy, because you’ve got this counsel in the mind, and you’re not too sure who the members are. Different voices come and go. It’s like a conference call. Some of the voices you can recognize, some of them you’re not so sure about. Especially if there are lots of different voices on the conference call, you begin to lose track of who’s who. They can come floating in at any time with any kind of opinion, any kind of thought. The voice that wants to concentrate, that wants to stay with the breath, that becomes just one of the voices in the committee, one of the voices on the conference call. The strategy here is maintaining your allegiance with that voice, because all too often you find your allegiance shifting. You’re sitting here, staying with the breath, and everything seems fine. And all of a sudden, something else comes in that pulls you away. And suddenly you find that you’ve shifted allegiance. You’re off with the other voice in this other thought world. It may have pulled you into sleepiness. It may have pulled you into ill will. It may have pulled you into lust, any of the hindrances. So the insight or the discernment or the strategic skill you need here is learning how, one, not to get hoodwinked by these voices, and also how not to shift your allegiance to them. So there are many levels of skill here. You remember basic principles, but it’s not just the remembering of basic principles. In other words, when lust comes, you can think about the thirty-two parts of the body as your first line of defense. You can remember that, but sometimes it doesn’t seem to work. When anger or ill will comes, you think about goodwill. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. So you have to get deeper into the issue of why does it work sometimes and why does it not work other times. You have to look very, very carefully to see what’s going on, to see the kind of conversation, the back-and-forth, the maneuvering that goes on in the mind. The more quiet you can make the mind, the more clearly you can hear the different voices and their different techniques. Like the voices, you may be able to sidestep me this time, but you won’t be able to do it the next time. After all, I have a good track record of winning out with thoughts of ill will, thoughts of lust, thoughts of whatever. Your will to fight it off just this once just goes away. It grows weak. You give in. Learn not to give in to that, because after all, each time lust comes, it comes once. It’s coming this time, this time, this time. As for pastimes, those are pastimes. Future times, well, you can take care of future times when they come, but work on it this time. Believe in the importance of overcoming this one instance of lust, this one instance of ill will. Because the skill you build up becomes a habit if you keep at it this time, this time, this time. And those habits get more deeply ingrained in the mind than any wise sayings that you might try to memorize. That’s what concentration practice is. It’s a learning of new habits. Now, you might wonder, “Well, why is one set of habits better than another set of habits? Don’t you want a mind that’s free of habits?” Well, eventually, yes. But before you get there, you’ve got to have good habits that make that sort of freedom possible. You’re trying to set up the mind. You’re trying to put it in the right position so it can gain awakening. So again, it’s a question of maneuvering the mind, positioning the mind. It’s not just having lots of wise sayings to fall back on or insights that you memorize. You put the mind in the position where it can keep producing those insights. We talked about the image of the goose that lays the golden eggs. What you want to do is keep feeding the goose, because these golden eggs, as I said, are like gold in a fairy tale. If you don’t use it right away, if you don’t put it to use right away, it turns into straw, turns into dust. So when you look at your collection of golden eggs, you open up the basket, and there it is, nothing but dust, nothing but straw. As for the goose, you don’t know where the goose has gone. The better approach is to keep feeding the goose. In other words, keep the mind as still as you can. Develop your powers of concentration. Try to get your awareness out of the head as much as you can and more into the body. When thoughts come in, they really take over the head. If that’s the only place where your concentration is, it gets knocked out. But if you have a sense of the whole body, the awareness filling the body, the good breath energy filling the body, you develop this larger foundation for yourself. Then when thoughts come in, you’ve still got part of the body that’s still yours, that still belongs to the concentration. You’re not totally knocked over. You’re creating a kind of arena in which these thoughts can come and go, but the arena itself isn’t destroyed. This is one of the reasons why a large frame of reference, an enlarged mind, an enlarged sense of the body, is such a useful tool in overcoming defilement. Defilement may come and take over part of your body, but it doesn’t have your whole body. And you at least have some place where you can retreat to and sit and watch the defilement come and watch the defilement go. And if it seems like the defilement has taken over the whole body, well, you’ve got a place to work with. You’ve got the breath to work with. And you want that to become your immediate reaction. Any tension that comes into the body, just think, “Relax, relax, relax.” Spread, allow the tension to flow out the hands, out the feet. Let that be your first reaction when any defilement comes into the mind. This takes practice, but with practice it becomes more and more habitual. It’s another good habitual strategy to have. So you’re working here not so much on wise ideas or wise insights, but wise strategies, which may be verbal or may be sub-verbal, but they’re more deeply ingrained. So that even when your memory starts to fail, you still have these habits. There was a reading one time about a man who, as he got older, he got a disease that really affected his memory. He was able to function properly otherwise, but his long-term memory was suddenly shot. He couldn’t remember old friends. And yet he had the habit of being very polite, so that when people came, even though he couldn’t remember them, he treated them well, because that was his habitual nature. So it shows that it’s possible, even when your memory begins to go, these habits stay. That’s what you want. Ajahn Suwat, the last time I saw him, mentioned that the perceptions of his mind, in the words “sannyāya” in Thai, can include memory as well as perceptions, the labels you put on things. He said his mind was sending him really strange messages, very strange perceptions. And he had to be very careful not to believe them. At least he had the mindfulness to know that. And then he added one more comment. He said, “But that thing I got through my meditation, that hasn’t changed. That doesn’t go away.” That’s even deeper than a habit. But to get to that spot, you need to develop these habits. It’s a training, just like when you train a dog or train a horse. In the canon, they talk often about training an elephant. There’s a passage where the Buddha is talking to an elephant trainer, and the trainer says, honestly enough, “Elephants are not all that hard to train. They’re not that many tricks to an elephant.” He said, “I can work with an elephant for about a week and know all the tricks that that elephant is capable of.” He said, “But human beings, you never come to the end of their tricks.” And sometimes when you’re dealing with your own mind, you have that same feeling. But at least you’re dealing with one mind here, and there’s no way that we’re going to come to the end of the tricks of the human race. But you can come to the end of the tricks of the mind by creating new tricks on the side of the Dharma, new habits that you bring to bear when greed arises, when anger arises, when lust arises, when fear arises. They have their tricks. They have their strategies. You need to develop your strategies, too. The first line of strategy is to breathe through whatever physical manifestation there is of that particular defilement. And then the next one is to listen to it talk and say, “I’m not going to go along with you until you give me a really good reason.” Then you’ll find that your mind is coming up with the reasons that up to now have seemed good enough, seemed reasonable enough. But you have to get stubborn. Say, “I’m not going to listen to that reason anymore. Give me something better.” In other words, you make up your mind that you’re not going to switch allegiances. Once you’ve made up your mind that way, it’s a lot easier to withstand these defilements when they come. A more difficult one is drowsiness. But you find that even there, there’s a kind of dialogue that goes on in the mind. As you sit here meditating, certain feelings come up in the body, and you habitually learn to associate those feelings with drowsiness. You say, “Ah, it’s time. It’s a sign that my body needs to rest, so I’ll give it some rest.” But if you resist it, say, “No, those are just feelings in the body. That’s not necessarily sleepiness.” You can sit and watch the feelings that you tend to associate with sleepiness and try to catalog them, try to observe them. Sometimes the simple fact of trying to observe the physical manifestations of sleepiness helps keep you awake. Sometimes you find you wake up another five minutes later wondering where you were, but at least you’re putting up a battle, and that’s the important thing. As you watch these defilements, you begin to see that there’s a certain part of the defilement that’s useful. There’s a certain kind of energy that you may want to employ. You may want to win over it to your side, but you can’t be complacent. Your first attitude has to be that you’re going to destroy your concentration, so you want to do battle with it as much as you can, either by being stubborn or trying to be as quiet as possible. There are lots of different habits you can develop, lots of different attitudes you can develop. As for the particular insights that work at a particular time, you don’t need to memorize those. Just try to create the state of mind that will give rise to new insights more appropriately and more concrete insights when the next situation comes up. Because the next situation, even though it may be anger again, there’s a slight difference. Some of the details of the anger, some of the details of its strategies in trying to take over the mind, may be different. But if you maintain this quality of alertness and mindfulness and try to keep your awareness open around whatever the defilement is, you find there’s room for a new insight to come in. A new image to come in. And as you work through the more blatant defilements, then you find that you can work on the subtler ones. They start seeming bigger in comparison. An image you can think of is picking the lint off of a carpet in an automobile. You go in and you don’t have a vacuum cleaner around. You’ve got your fingers. First you start out by picking out the biggest pieces of lint. Then you’ve turned around and you’ve thrown those out of the car. Then you turn around and the other pieces of lint that seemed small before suddenly seem big because the bigger ones are gone. In other words, your sense of proportion changes as the more blatant defilements get taken care of. Then you have the ability to work with the more subtle ones. And you find that the same principle applies, just watching until you can see the fallacy in the defilement. Or you can see a good reason for not switching your allegiance and deciding with the defilement. This way you get to work with more and more subtle ones, more and more pervasive ones. Until finally all the lint is gone. When we meditate, we like to think about how much we’re going to sit here and enjoy the concentration. Working with the defilements seems like a big distraction, but it’s a necessary part of it. As the John Lewin said, it’s when you practice that you really get to know your defilements. If you don’t do battle with them, you don’t see their tricks. You simply fall for the tricks, but you don’t understand what they are. But if you decide you’ve had enough of falling under their power, then you start to understand them. And the more you understand them, the less they have any control over you. So the insight here is one of strategy and habits, not so much of wise sayings that you can repeat, but a more and more instinctive way of dealing with the defilements. That gets more and more ingrained the more you bring it to bear. So each time you deal with a defilement, even though the mind may threaten, you may be able to overcome this little instance of lust, but you’re going to come back. Well, okay, when you come back, you may come back in a slightly different form, but at least I’ve had one victory here. That’s the attitude you should have. And with each little victory, you develop strength. And the strength builds bit by bit by bit until finally all the lint is gone. Finally you take over. The Dharma is in charge. And that’s what you want.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0212n5a1%20Wise%20Strategies.mp3>