Practical Wisdom

July 27, 2005

People in different cultures all over the world comment that as you’re about to die, your life passes before your eyes. And it’s not so much the things that other people have done that pass before your eyes; it’s what you’ve done. Or, in cases where you should have done something, the things you didn’t do. That’s what hits the hardest, which is the opposite of our normal, everyday concerns. We tend to focus on what other people do, what they say, or what they might do to us, or what they might say about us. And that can consume us, and we tend to forget to look at what we’re doing. But this is a typical pattern in the human mind to focus on things that you’re not responsible for and to forget the things that you are responsible for. If you remember that your life is shaped by your intentions, then you also remember that the shape of your life is something that you can determine for yourself by looking after the quality of your intentions. And when you start worrying about the future, you can think, “Well, as long as you have the mental qualities that make sure that your intentions are skillful, then you’re going to be okay, no matter what.” And so this is how you invest in the future. This is how you prepare for the future, is developing good quality qualities of mind and trying to make sure that they’re as good as possible, no matter what the circumstances. So this is one of the reasons why we develop alertness, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, and how we learn to be persistent and ardent in developing these things. Because these are the qualities that guarantee the quality of your intentions. There’s a teaching in the commentaries about the cycle of action. First there’s the intention, and then there’s the result, either pleasure or pain. And then there tends to be defilement. When there’s pleasure, you want to hold on to it and do what you can to maintain it. When there’s pain, you want to push it away. So greed, anger, and delusion kind of rise around. The pleasure and the pain. And then the greed, anger, and delusion have an impact on your actions, on your intentions. And this keeps the cycle going around and around, and it keeps it going around in directions that tend to lead to suffering. The more the defilement, the greater the suffering. Because when your mind is clouded, it’s hard to make the right decision about what to do. And many times the decisions go underground. That’s the main thing that we’re deluded about. So you want to learn how to bring as much mindfulness and alertness to this cycle as you can. Now, you can’t cut the cycle between the action and its result. But you can cut it between the result and the defilement. Or at the very least, you can control it between the defilement and the action. In other words, when you know that there’s greed, anger, and delusion in the mind, you can make up your mind you’re not going to follow them. Now, that requires mindfulness. It requires alertness. Even better, when the pleasure or the pain arises, if you can just be right there with the pleasure or the pain and not give rise to craving, not give rise to greed or anger around it, not give rise to delusion around it. Again, this requires mindfulness. It requires alertness. And on top of that, it requires a very practical kind of wisdom and discernment. Say a really strong emotion arises in your mind and part of you would really like to act on it, but another part knows that if you act on it, there’s going to be trouble. An important part of wisdom is learning how to say no to yourself in cases like that. And because of the greed, or the anger, or the delusion, or the fear, or the passion, or whatever arises, there will be things that you know would give rise to good results, but you don’t want to do them. And you have to learn how to figure out how to talk yourself into doing them in the midst of the anger, in the midst of the defilement in the mind. So wisdom lies not so much in being able to describe emptiness or being able to understand really abstruse teachings. It means how to deal with cause and effect in an intelligent way in the midst of your defilements. You learn how to say no to them. Sometimes this means learning how to cajole yourself. Sometimes it means learning how to be strict with yourself. It’s like dealing with a child. The wise parent knows when to be strict with a kid, knows when to give it a little extra encouragement, when to send it up to its bedroom without any food, and being able to sense what are the signs that tell you what to do in any particular circumstance to get around the fact that there is greed in your mind or there is anger in your mind. This is why it’s good to associate with people who have learned to gain some control over their anger. You get good examples. And this is why meditation is such an important part of the practice, not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed in the monastery, but wherever you are, learning how to stick with the breath, keep the mind in a comfortable place. That right there is a large part of the battle. If anger comes and you feel that you just can’t stand it, you’ve got to get it out of your system, it’s a sign you’ve lost touch with the breath, you haven’t been on good terms with the breath, you’ve forgotten how to use the breath to disperse the anger. The same is true of lust. If you can learn how to breathe through the feelings of the physical manifestations in the body, relax your hands, relax your feet, you can start occupying the body instead of having that particular feeling occupying the body. Then you’re in a better position to be able to sidestep it, to figure out where its weak points are, so that you can focus on the weak points of the anger, or the lust, or the greed, or whatever, and work your way around it. In particular, you can work around the message it’s constantly sending you. You’re going to have to give in to me, so you better give in now. Question that. This is pretty much the way of the world. This is the way we’re doing things now, so you better accept it. You better give in, because you’re going to have to give in someplace along the line, so give in now. Just keep questioning that. Say, “Well, maybe I may give in five minutes or ten minutes from now, but I don’t want to give in now. For the time being, I’m going to stick with what I know is right. What I know is going to be skillful.” Many times you find that in five or ten minutes, the greed or the anger has lost its power. You weathered the storm. Another one of its messages is, “I’m going to come back at some point, so you might as well give in now again.” Say, “Well, maybe I’ll give in when you come back, but not right now.” Do your best to make the body a comfortable place to stay. In the meantime, that right there gives you a lot of energy. In other words, learn how to use what you’ve got here in the present moment in terms of your breath, your perceptions, and your ability to analyze what’s going on. Learn how to use these things as your allies rather than allowing them to take over your defilements. This is one of the ways in which meditation shows its real benefits. It’s helpful in that battle of getting yourself to do what you know you should do, because it’s going to give good results, or to abstain from the things you know are going to give bad results. All too often, when you’re meditating, we think of wisdom as being very refined, something about emptiness or not-self or other very abstract things. Well, emptiness and not-self show their value when they are useful in this problem right here. You look at the defilement and you see that it’s empty of self. You look at the state of the mind when the defilement passes away and it’s empty of suffering. It’s empty of stress. That’s when emptiness becomes a useful tool. The same with not-self. You look at the defilement and it’s not yours. It may claim to be yours, but you don’t have to believe that claim. Ask to see the receipt where you bought it. It doesn’t have any receipt to show. Or, as John Lee says in his talk on consciousnesses, if a particular idea comes into your mind and you know it’s going to be for your own good, okay, you can side with that kind of thought. But you even know it’s going to be harmful to you down the line, just so maybe it’s somebody else’s thought. Maybe it’s the parasites in your blood or the worms in your stomach. In other words, just because a thought comes into the mind and begins to take over the body doesn’t mean that you have to sign on to it. That’s a way of using the teaching on not-self in the real work of wisdom, which is to figure out how to do the things you may not want to do but you know are going to be good, or to abstain from the things that you know are going to be harmful, and to get yourself to do the things you know are going to be good, whether you like them or not. That’s where wisdom really counts. As for what other people do, that’s their business. That’s their karma. Your responsibility is what you do, and it’s important that you keep that point always in mind.

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