The Buddha’s Wisdom

November 7, 2024

When we hear the word “wisdom,” we usually think of wise sayings, the sort of thing you find in books where you have one per page. You read them, they put your mind at peace. They remind you of things that are important that you tend to forget, or things that you’re holding on to that you don’t need to. You read them and you get a sense of peace because they seem to be coming from a peaceful mind. The Buddha has wise sayings like this. That’s one of the reasons why the Dhammapada is so popular. Short sayings that you can hold in mind. Because the way you talk to yourself is often very unwise, and it’s good to have new voices inside. But the Buddha saw that for wisdom to stick, it had to be more than just wise sayings. There had to be a training. Because he saw that there was an ultimate peace in the mind that couldn’t be found simply by repeating wise things to yourself or thinking skillful thoughts. You had to take the mind apart to see what the real problem was. He identifies it for you in the Four Noble Truths. The problem is suffering. The suffering we inflict on ourselves, and we don’t have to. The suffering identified as clinging to the five aggregates. And he defined clinging as desire and passion. The cause of suffering is craving. Craving, too, is a desire and passion. The difference being that the word for craving, dhanah, is also the word for thirst. You’re looking for something. To feed on. With the word for clinging, upadana, also desire and passion. You’re feeding on something. You’ve found what you want, or found something that’s similar to what you want. You’re holding on to it. The fact that you’re still feeding means you’re not full. You’re trying to take things in. So there’s still desire, there’s still passion, there’s still a lack. You think you’re filling the lack. But the Buddha’s pointing out that that’s a really precarious position, being dependent on something like that. The fact that it’s precarious, that’s where the suffering is. He said it is possible also to put an end to that suffering. Which of course means putting an end to the desire and passion, which sounds kind of scary. But he promises that it’s the ultimate happiness. We think we’re feeding ourselves and gaining something from it, but we’re actually getting in the way of our happiness. So as he analyzes it, he says the cause for the suffering that we feel in the world doesn’t come from things outside. It comes from within the mind. The mind is talking to itself in an unwise way. On the one hand you have the messages that you send from one moment to the next, telling you what to watch out for, what’s important. Basically telling you where to pay attention, how to pay attention. Sending messages that you then pick up. And sometimes there are other messages that come in that don’t seem to be coming from the present moment, they’re coming from someplace else. The Buddha identifies these as voices coming from the past, your past karma. And John Lee talks about them as being sometimes the other consciousnesses in your body. Why are they other consciousnesses in your body? Well, they’re little beings in your body. Some you can see, some you can’t see. But they too can be a manifestation of past karma. Or you can think of them as the committee of the mind, and you have lots of old habits, of ways in which you’ve looked for happiness in the past. They come bubbling up. And in a Thai phrase, “sumarai,” they step into your inner conversation. And they seem to be you talking to you. But they come from someplace else. Maybe an old you. But still we have to learn how to not listen to these voices, not take them on. This is one of the reasons why when the Buddha explains suffering, or the causes of suffering, independent co-arising, so many things come prior to sensory contact, before you even see anything or hear anything. The mind is already primed, sometimes by your opinions, sometimes by your perceptions, the labels you put on things. You’re already looking for something. And what you’re looking for is usually based on ignorance. Ignorance of what? Well, ignorance of the real problem, which is that you’re causing suffering through your desires and passions. What sets the Buddha apart from other wise teachers is that he offers a real training. You borrow his wisdom so that you can learn how to create your own. That training, of course, is the Noble Eightfold Path, which can also be expressed in the triple training of heightened virtue, heightened mind, or concentration, and heightened discernment. These are the practices that help you become more sensitive to what’s going on in your mind, help get rid of that ignorance, so you can see exactly where you’re causing yourself suffering, and where you don’t have to. He recommends the practice of virtue, beginning with the five precepts. Give you something new to tell yourself. Watch out for these actions. Don’t do these actions. Don’t kill Don’t steal. Don’t engage in illicit sex. Don’t lie. Don’t take intoxicants. Then you break these precepts only intentionally, which means that you have to become very sensitive to your intentions. In other words, if you step on an ant but you didn’t intend to, or you intentionally stepped on it but you perceived it as something else, not a living being, you don’t break the precept. That calls attention to your intentions. At the same time, he reminds you, you’ve got to try to be as harmless as possible. You get more and more sensitive to the ways in which you do cause harm, some of which are expressed in the precepts, and others which are not. But they become part of your virtue. Because virtue is expressed not only in precepts, but also in principles like contentment, modesty, restraint. Ways in which you can look at your impact on the world, and the impact of your actions on your mind, to see where you’re causing harm, and making up your mind you don’t want to cause that harm. And the precepts require that you become honest with yourself, which is a really important principle in the practice. Because especially as you get into concentration, you see that even in a quiet mind, the mind can dilute itself. So you want to be really honest about what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. The practice of concentration actually begins with mindfulness. It gives you new things to keep in mind, not just the precepts. But now you’re going to focus on, say, just the breath in and of itself, or feelings or mind states just in and of themselves. But it’s good to start with the breath, because everything else revolves around that. You’re ardent, alert, mindful. Ardent in trying to do this well. Alert, watching what you’re actually doing. And mindful to have a sense of what you’ve learned from the past about what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. So if something unskillful comes up, you also remember how to deal with it. The Buddha talks about the main obstacles to concentration as being the five hindrances. Sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt. And that the factors of right concentration, the first level of right concentration, are also five. Directed thought, evaluation, singleness and preoccupation. Rapture, pleasure. That’s the state you’re trying to create through right mindfulness. The texts talk about getting rid of the hindrances first and then developing the factors, the first jhana. But sometimes you work on the factors of the jhana first and then you run into the hindrances. And John Lee had a Dhamma talk one time where he pointed out how each of the five factors counteracts a specific hindrance. It’s the only one I can find in all of his teachings where he tried to make that connection. And the woman, or the nun, who was taking notes could remember only two of them. So maybe he sensed that it was kind of artificial because you can’t say, “Well, I’m going to counteract sensual desire with just one factor of jhana.” You have to have all five of them working together. But each of them does have a specialty. And you can see that it does actually deal with a particular hindrance. I think you start out with directed thought. That’s to counteract sensual desire. Instead of thinking about pleasures of the senses, you give yourself something better to think about. First you remind yourself of the drawbacks of those pleasures and drawbacks of just the quality of the Buddha called sensuality in the mind. Those are two different things. Sensuality is your fascination with planning for sensual pleasures. Once you’ve had a good one, say you’ve had a good meal, then talking to yourself about what a great meal it was, priming yourself for more. That’s what you’re actually trying to counteract, those kinds of thoughts. Well, the Buddha says give yourself something better to think about. Think about the breath and what it can do in the body. And then you bring in evaluation. That’s to counteract doubt. The doubts that you might have about, well, is this really going to work? Am I capable of doing this? Can I really get good results? If you sit there doubting, nothing’s going to happen. But you’re telling yourself, well, let’s give it a try. Let’s really evaluate what’s going on in the mind. What is skillful in the mind? What is not? What’s skillful in the breath and what’s not? And you begin to see cause and effect and action. You breathe in a certain way, there’s certain results. You conceive of the breath in a certain way, there’s certain results. So you’re trying to think of the breath, not so much as the air coming in and out through the nose. Think of it in the Buddhist terms as part of the wind element in the body itself, the energy that flows through the body, that allows the air to come in, allows the air to go out. It also accompanies the flow of the blood, the flow of impulses through your nerves. Try to get conceived of that and see what it does for the mind. And as you begin to see, it really does make a difference. That overcomes your doubt. So it allows you to settle down, get deeper into concentration. It allows for singleness of preoccupation, which is to counteract restlessness and anxiety. You stay with one thing. You remind yourself, whatever happens in the world, whatever can happen in the world, you’re going to need mindfulness, you’re going to need alertness, you’re going to need the qualities you develop in concentration. And giving your full attention right here is really important. In other words, you’re not going to learn anything. You’ll just learn bits and pieces. So this is your safe place. Because as you stay here, you’re developing all the good qualities you’re going to need. And when you have these three factors, then the other two come. Pleasure, which helps to counteract ill will. And rapture, which energizes you, helps to counteract sloth and torpor. When you’ve got these five factors working together, they can help ward off the hindrances and create a real sense of stillness in the mind. You’re going to need that stillness if you really want to see your mind. You don’t know your thoughts until you’ve gotten out of them. And you can be in what you think are really clever, skillful thoughts, but you’re not really going to know whether they truly are clever, really are skillful, until you’ve stepped out of them and been quiet for a while. And put yourself in a position where you can see the thoughts as a process. In other words, you don’t get into the content. You see how they arise, where they begin as a little stirring in the energy of the body, which could either be physical or mental. And you see how the mind slaps a perception on that. So this is a thought about X, and then it runs with it. Fabricates more things around it. You’re not going to see this until you’ve stepped out of your thoughts. This is why you need to get the mind really absorbed in the sense of the breath filling the body. So your sense of your awareness is larger than the thoughts, surrounds the thoughts, allows you to step out of them. It also gives you a sense of well-being. Often, after all, our suffering is feeding on things. And we feed on the pleasures of the world because we think they’re the best things we can find. Meditation gives you a better pleasure. Pleasures of form, rather than the pleasures of sensuality. And so you can begin to question your old ways of feeding, your old ways of suffering. And you see the equation that the Buddha made. Feeding is suffering. And the concentration allows you to get into a position where you can apply what the Buddha would often recommend, which is a five-step process. I call it the Buddha’s five-step program. When something comes up and you see that it’s potentially harmful, the first thing you want to do is look for its origination. Why is its cause in the mind? Because we’re not looking for the suffering that comes from unpleasant things outside. We’re looking for what is this tendency the mind has to crave, cling, desire, go for its passions. Where does that come from? And then you notice that whatever it is, it doesn’t last as long as you thought. Sometimes we think that we’re angry for a long time or lustful for a long time. But it just comes and goes, comes and goes. When it goes, you want to see why. And then when you pick it up again, well, why did you do that? That’s where you get into the third step, which is to see your lure. What’s attractive about these things? And you have to be forewarned that what’s attractive about it may not be the first thing that appears. The mind has this tendency to lie to itself, as I said before. And hopefully your practice of virtue and concentration has taught you to be a little bit skeptical about what the mind tells you. And then you want to look for the drawbacks to counteract that lure. Because those desires and passions that cause suffering and constitute suffering are basically based on value judgments as to what’s worth doing and what’s not. And what you’re trying to do is create new value judgments inside. So you see the drawbacks, which you’ve often blinded yourself so you don’t see them. You see the allure, which you’ve also blinded yourself to. You’re not admitting what the allure genuinely was. You’re in a better position to see that it’s not worth it, whatever it was that you were going for. And that’s when you can find the escape, which is the subduing of desire and passion. You see, it’s not worth it. You don’t want to get involved. And it was your desires and passions that got you involved to begin with. And not only that, but also created those five aggregates that you were clinging to. And there’s no more passion, there’s no more drive to fix those aggregates. Do you think of fixing food? As long as you think you’re going to eat and it’s good food, you fix it. But when you see that it’s not worth it, why fix any more food like that? And the mind can drop all these things. And it can find that what the Buddha said really is true. That by letting go of these things, it’s lifting a huge weight off the mind. And as you look further, you find that even this concentration that you were using as a basis for your discernment, that too is fabricated. And the right view that was pointing you there, that too is fabricated. So you apply the same five-step program to these things. You see their allure, which is that they’ve created a lot of pleasure that you wouldn’t have had before. But their drawback is that you still have to keep fabricating them. And you remember the Buddha’s statement that there is an unfabricated happiness that comes when you totally let go. And that’s when you can let go. The mind is unbound. The Buddha doesn’t talk very much about unbinding, but he does have names for it. And the names indicate that it has five properties. One, it is a kind of consciousness. It’s called consciousness without surface. The image is of a light beam that doesn’t land anywhere. You can think of going out into the night sky, looking at the night sky. You have to remind yourself there’s light filling all of that darkness. But we don’t see it because it’s not reflected off of things. When we see it reflected off the moon, we say, “Oh yeah, there’s light.” But the beings that miss the moon, we don’t see those. But they’re there. So that’s one attribute. It’s consciousness. Two, it’s intense bliss. The Buddha calls it safety, refuge, harbor. It’s a good, safe place to be. The third quality is that it’s truthful. In other words, it doesn’t change. Because it’s not caused by anything. It doesn’t come and go with causes, as the causes come and go. Then it’s freedom. It’s a radical freedom. You’re even freed from the restraints of space and time. And the fifth quality is excellence. It’s the best thing there is. So these are the indications that come from the names the Buddha gives to Nibbana. But the names are just pointers to get you interested in going there. When you finally get there, you find there are no perceptions at all that can do justice to it. But you’ve used perceptions, as you’ve used all the other aggregates as part of the path, to get you headed in the right direction. But the goal itself is something beyond. That’s the wisdom of the Buddha. He points you there. So he’s training you, basically, so that you don’t have to keep borrowing his wisdom. You can start creating some of your own. And that wisdom will take you to this goal. As he guarantees, it’s the best thing there is. Which means the wisdom that he offers you and the wisdom that he trains you to create for yourself is much better than just reading wise sayings out of a book. It actually delivers you to the real peace that you may taste a little bit of when you read wise sayings. But the Buddha shows you how to get to the real thing.

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