More Wisdom for Dummies

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Buddhist wisdom is often presented as very paradoxical, subtle, hard to understand. But the basic principles are actually quite simple. You learn how to make distinctions. You begin to see that some of the things you do are good and some of the things are not so good. And you have the desire to stop doing the things that are not good. That’s a very basic principle. In fact, this one passes where the Buddha said, “Even though you may be a fool, the extent to which you see your foolishness, to that extent you’re wise.” So we’re dealing with wisdom for dummies. You don’t have to be all that bright in terms of reading knowledge, but you don’t have to have the quality of truthfulness and that desire to be harmless. There are parts of the world that say the desire to be harmless is foolish, childish, immature, unrealistic. But the Buddha pointed out that good will, the desire for your happiness, the desire for everybody else’s happiness, is a part of wisdom. So what does it mean to see your own foolishness? You see that you did something, and the results didn’t come out well. And you had the choice. You didn’t have to do that. If it were something you had to do, then no foolishness would be involved. But you did have the choice. And you made a bad choice. It’s a very basic principle. And these principles are contained right in that realization. One is that you do have the choice to act in different ways. And two is your actions do yield consequences. This is the basic principle of karma. Once you realize that you can have the choice not to be foolish, then the next step is to want to find out what you can do to become wiser. One of the principles the Buddha lays down is that you see what duties fall to you and which ones don’t. And you take up the duties that do fall to you, and you put aside the ones that don’t. This principle goes all the way through the Buddhist teachings. That’s what duties does the Buddha talk about. One, the duty to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones. That comes right out of that principle that you do have choices. Some choices are better than others. And again, you have the desire, based on goodwill, to not do harm. Then a more refined version of that comes up in the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha sets out the duty with regard to suffering and stress, which is to comprehend it. For the cause, the duty is to abandon it. The sensation of suffering is something you want to realize. And the path is something you want to develop. Notice there, you want that because of your goodwill. So you’re trying to maintain that attitude and look at your actions. When the Buddha was teaching his son, we’re told the son was seven years old. First he taught on the principle of truthfulness. In other words, if you’re going to become wiser in your actions, you have to be true in observing what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, and the results you’re getting. If you can’t be true to yourself in this way, then no matter how much you may know about the Dhamma, you haven’t really learned the first step. Before you act, you ask yourself, “What are the consequences of this going to be?” Because some of the things, of course, you can foresee, and some of them you can’t. If you’re not sure, you can try things out. But if you know that if you do X, somebody’s going to get harmed, then you just don’t do it. If you don’t see any harm, either to yourself or for others, you go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, you look at the results that are coming out in the immediate present. And if you are actually causing harm, then you stop. If you’re not causing any harm, you can continue. And then when you’re done, you look back at the long-term consequences. And you realize that you caused harm in spite of your efforts not to cause harm. Then you go talk it over with someone who’s more advanced in the path to see what kind of advice you can get. And you determine you’re not going to repeat that mistake. But if you don’t see any harm, then you can take joy in what you’ve done. That you’re advancing in the training, and you continue trying to train even better. Now, that there teaches a lot of basic principles of the Dhamma. One of which is that some of the actions you do have results immediately in the present, and some of the actions you have to wait. For the results to come. In other words, some actions are like spitting into the wind. It comes right back at you. Putting your finger in a fire. You don’t have to wait until the next lifetime for it to burn. Other actions are like planting a seed. You plant the seed today, you can’t expect the full-grown product right away. It’ll take time. But there is the basic principle of causality that the Buddha taught. That what we experience in the present moment is a combination of results from past actions, our current actions, and the results of current actions. You can pursue that, and it can get quite complex. But as long as you hold to the basic principle that you’re going to try to do your best, then you can use this principle for its intended purpose. Again, when you see that thread all the way through, you do your best because of goodwill. That’s how you turn from a fool into a wise person. So you can derive all the Buddhist teachings from this basic principle. You recognize that you’ve caused some harm, and you don’t want to cause harm again. You recognize that you did something foolish, and you don’t want to continue being a fool. There’s nothing complex about that, nothing abstruse. But it does take a lot of truthfulness in order to abide by it. We had the discussion yesterday about holy fools. To whatever extent a holy fool recognizes that he’s a fool, he’s got some hope. But where the Buddha differs here is that if you want to stop being a fool, you look into your own actions. Learn from your mistakes. And you hold on to the things that people like about holy fools, which are, one, that they have goodwill, and two, that they’re truthful. To that extent, they have the seeds for wisdom. But here, where the training differs is that you have to turn around and look at your actions very carefully. Be very observant. Because even in the best intentioned mind, you’ll find that there are some falsehoods going on, the areas where you’re lying to yourself. And so your goodwill is what’s going to see you through. And you realize, “I’ve been lying to myself. That’s foolish. I’ve got to stop.” So this is wisdom for dummies. When you admit the fact that you’re not all that smart, that you have some big blank spots in your wisdom, then there’s hope for you. It’s the people who are already good who are never going to learn anything. That was John Lee’s comment one time about a monk who came to visit him. The monk was pretty proud of the fact that he was a student of John Sauer. He was kind of made it almost a public declaration that he was going to come and have a Dhamma discussion with John Lee. And John Lee talked about all kinds of things aside from the Dhamma. And then the monk left. And someone asked him, “Why didn’t you talk about the Dhamma?” The Buddha said, “Well, this person thinks he’s already good. What more can I teach him?” So there’s a wisdom in seeing your own foolishness. Which is why I say that some of the best expressions of Buddha’s wisdom are when he explains wisdom for dummies. Because it’s there that everything becomes clear.

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