Wisdom Through Doing

March 14, 2025

Back at Wat Thammasatthi, when we built the jetty, when they blasted the rock where the jetty was going to be built, there was a piece of rock that came out. It was a perfect rectangle. So Jon Foon decided that we would carve a Buddha footprint in it. And on the side, he gave the name of one of the Buddha’s teachings, itibod, which means the basis of power. It was a pun, because the word bod can also mean foot. But it also had a deeper meaning. The jetty was built through following the four bases of power. And the same with our ordination all here. Without those bases of power, this wouldn’t be here. What are the bases of power? It would start out with desire. You have to want to do something or in order for it to succeed. Sometimes we hear that craving is bad, it’s the cause of suffering. But there’s also the desire that’s part of right effort. You want to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. And you do your best to motivate yourself. So you really do want that. The second is persistence. You stick with it. Once you’ve decided that this is the right course you want, that you want to follow, you actually put forth the effort. Like as you’re meditating here right now. Anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you want to let it go. As you’re focused on the breath, anything that’s not related to the mind and the breath together, just let it go. Give the mind some time to be by itself. You’re not concerned about anything else but just its awareness in the present moment, anchored in the breath, with a sense of well-being, because of all the elements in the body. The breath is the easiest to manipulate. You can make it long, you can make it short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep or shallow. And you can experiment to see what you like. What feels good for the body right now. If you’ve been feeling tense, you want something that’s more relaxing. If you’ve been feeling tired, you want to breathe in a way that’s energizing. Try to find the balance of what’s just right. And the third quality is intent. You pay a lot of attention to what you’re doing. You’re not just going through the motions. Or as the Chan Tzuo would say, “sak dua tam,” which means you’re just doing it without really paying much attention to what you’re doing. You’re not going to get anywhere that way. You have to notice what you’re doing and what are the results you’re getting. Because the Buddhist teachings are all about cause and effect. And he’s especially interested in causes coming from the mind and the effects that can either create suffering or put an end to it. So that’s what you want to focus on. He’s not the sort of teacher who would talk about beings far away. He would mention them. But always in the context of action. Where do beings come from? They come from actions. Those who’ve gone to happy places, rebirth on the human level or something higher. It’s because of the good they’ve done. Those who’ve gone to bad places, it’s because of the bad they’ve done. This comes back to, what are you doing? Have a strong sense that what you’re doing right now is going to have consequences. So try to do it well. That means giving it your full attention. Then the final quality, the Pali word is vipamsa. It’s a hard word to translate. It has many meanings. Partly it means analysis, but also any active faculty of the mind where you’re trying to figure things out. And here you’re trying to pass judgment. Those results you’re getting from your actions, are they good? Are they really what you want? Or could you do better? Of these four bases for success, this is the wisdom one. This is the one that’s informed by the Four Noble Truths that we chanted just now. Because when we’re judging our actions, you have to have a high standard if you really want to get the best. And the Buddha says the best is available. It is possible to put an end, a total end, to suffering. A lot of people just dismiss that as a possibility. But his business was to open it up again. And when you look at what you’re doing and the results you’re getting, how do they measure up against the total end of suffering? What could you do to go further in that direction? Because wisdom is not just passing judgment on things. But it’s also part of the motivation. That motivation that goes into persistence, the desire, the fact that you’re paying intent. All that comes out of wisdom. It’s the wisdom that sees that the Buddha didn’t speak just to entertain people or to decorate their minds with interesting concepts. He taught them things they should do. And if you want to benefit the most from his teachings, you have to put them into action yourself. So you’re passing judgment not to come to a final score or final grade. You’re passing judgment as a craftsperson would pass judgment on, say, on a piece of furniture that he’s making. Or food, like a cook passes judgment on food. You pass judgment so that you can do it better next time. Same here as we meditate. Some people say, “I meditated and I didn’t get anywhere, so that’s it. I’m not interested anymore.” That’s not proper judgment. Proper judgment is, “I meditated. I didn’t get the results I wanted. I may have been doing something wrong. What could that have been?” And you go back and you look at the results. Look at what you did. Make a connection between the two. And try to figure out what you can do otherwise, which is why one of the aspects of vimamsa is ingenuity. Trying to figure things out and then using your ingenuity to figure out something better. Working on a skill here. This is one of the lessons that came from building this building. We learned a lot when we had plans. And the plans gave us good directions. But there was a lot that was not in the plans. So we had to figure out how to fill in the spaces, fill in the blanks. That required using your ingenuity, thinking back on your past experiences, and then improvising. So we have to remember the Buddha didn’t lay everything out. But he laid out outlines. As for the ways in which we fill in those outlines, that’s up to our own ingenuity, our own desire. All these aspects of the basis for success, basis of power, they all work together. They all come down to that desire to find something, some way to put an end to suffering. And you want to do it well. So we’re thinking about all the effort that went into building this building and getting it so we can inhabit it. The work is still not done. There’s still more to be done. But the lessons we learned from acting on a skillful desire, sticking with it, observing what’s working and what’s not working, and then making adjustments. This is how the meditation grows. This is how your practice as a whole grows. When you’re observing the precepts, it’s the same sort of thing. It’s not just a matter of following rules. Because you realize that there are times when, say, you have some information, someone else wants it, and you’re sure that they’re going to use it for a bad purpose. So how do you not give them the information? But at the same time not lie. That requires ingenuity. Or you’ve got pests in the house. How do you get rid of the pests without killing them? That requires ingenuity too. So the basic lesson in all this is, start out with the best plans you can find. And as you put them into practice, you’ll find there’s a lot that you’re going to learn. The Buddha himself made this comment one time, pointing out that the path starts with the right view. But the right view needs a lot more in order to work. In other words, as you put the various aspects of the path into practice, your views get better and better, more precise, more accurate, more helpful. Wisdom through doing, and trying to do it well. So right now, as you’re meditating, focusing on the breath, try to make sure that you really want to be here doing this. And you’re going to stick with it, and you’re going to give it your full attention. And then you’re going to reflect on it. Reflect on what you’ve learned by acting. And John Lee would make this comment, he says, “As with any skill, if you’re learning about, if you’re trying to make a pair of pants or a shirt, you learn from the cloth. You learn from the thread. If you’re making clay tiles, you learn from the clay.” Of course, the thread and the cloth just sit there. It’s your doing. You’re doing things with them. And then trying to do it well. That’s how your wisdom grows.

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