

Practical Wisdom

October 18, 2019

Usually when we think about Buddhist wisdom, we think about things that are fairly abstract: emptiness, not-self, dependent co-arising. But the Buddha often explained wisdom in much simpler terms.

For instance, there's a verse where he says that a wise man sees that if there's a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, he'll abandon the lesser one for the sake of the greater. Sounds very simple, common sense. But then of course, common sense sometimes is hard to come by, so it's good to be reminded.

There's also a passage where he says that wisdom can be measured by how you deal with two situations. One, things that you like to do that give bad results, and you know how to talk yourself out of that; and two, things you don't like to do, or are difficult to do, but give good results, and you learn how to give yourself the energy, convince yourself that you really *want* to do these things.

So wisdom for him is pragmatic. It comes down to the question of what's worth doing. And a lot of the practice is learning how to straighten out your ideas about what's worth doing. Because all too often we go by what gives results quickly, but quick results and good results are not necessarily the same thing. Something that gives pleasure immediately may give pain in the long term, and vice versa. So when you're dealing with something painful in the practice, something that's difficult in the practice, you've got to think about the long term. You've got to give yourself energy. You've got to, as the Buddha said, generate desire.

Because if the practice were simply a matter of trading suffering for happiness, we'd all go for it. But there are many aspects of the practice that are difficult and require that you give up things that are going to give you pleasure in the short term.

So what do you do? You learn how to talk to yourself. You try to figure out what will get you to *want* to do the practice. Sometimes heedfulness works, when you think about the dangers that come from a mind that's not trained. This is where it's useful sometimes to go down to old folks' homes and see: This is what happens to people who don't train their minds. Not that the aging is what happens. It's the mental illnesses that you see, the people whose minds are out of control. Strength of the body has left them, and strength of the mind has left them as well. You don't want to be in a situation like that. You want to keep your mind strong even as the body grows weak, both for your own sake and for the sake of the people who'll be looking after you.

Or you can think thoughts of compassion for yourself. Think about all the suffering you've been through. Remember the Buddha's image of looking at the ocean: realizing that you've shed more tears than that over these many, many lifetimes than there's water in the ocean. And

how many more oceans do you want to cry? If you really have some compassion for yourself, you want to practice. You can also make the practice a point of pride: not so much the pride of being better than other people as the pride of mastering a craft.

We've got this in-and-out breath that we don't make much use of. We breathe in, we breathe out, basically just enough to keep ourselves alive. But if you explore the breath, you begin to realize that there's a lot more going on here. Here's where it's good to have the breath capture your imagination. What are the ways you conceive of the body, conceive of the breath? What is your relationship to the mind and the body? Where are you in the body when you're breathing? Where is the breath? How does the breath come in? Or when the air comes in, does the breath energy start outside or does the breath energy start inside? It's got to start inside.

This is one of the paradoxes of the body: The breath energy spreads from a point inside, but it pulls air in from the outside. So it's good to see how those two are related. Why? Because the more you can gain some control over the breath, the more you learn about the mind and about the body at the same time, but particularly about the mind. Ajaan Lee says that the breath is a mirror for the mind. When you get the breath smooth, you can see your mind clearly there. Whatever's happening in the present moment, you see it clearly.

This is where it gets *really* interesting: to see how the mind shapes its concepts, how different thoughts come into the mind. What are the stages by which they do this? This is something really worth knowing, because our thoughts have fooled us for so long, and here's our chance to see through their subterfuges, their tricks.

So if you find yourself getting bored with the practice or tiring of the practice, it's a sign you're not paying careful attention. Because the most important thing in your life is what your mind is doing right now. It makes the difference between long-term happiness and long-term pain. So it only stands to reason that you want to know how the mind goes about making choices that will then lead to long-term pain. Nobody wants it, and yet we keep doing it again and again and again. It's because we don't know what's worth doing and what's not worth doing. Our values are all wrong. If we can learn how to understand the workings of the mind, then we can begin to straighten out our values.

So do your best to put the mind in a good place. A lot of learning how to look for the long-term comes from developing a sense of at least relative well-being right now. It's like the difference between someone who has no food and someone who has a good supply of food. If you have no food at all, all you can think about is the next meal. If you have a good supply of food, you're free to think about other things. The next meal's not so much of a problem.

So breathe in a way that gives a sense of well-being right now, a sense of ease being right here, a sense of fullness being right here. How do you get fullness? Start with a part of the body that's sensitive to the breath as it comes in and goes out. And ask yourself: Do you squeeze that part of the body when you breathe out? Do you stretch it when you breathe in? Would it be

more comfortable if you just allowed it to just be there, not changing as you breathe in, not changing as you breathe out? Don't squeeze anything right there. After a while, a sense of fullness will develop. Then think of that fullness spreading. See how long you can maintain it. See what destroys it. And when it seems to be destroyed, how do you get it back?

As you do this, you get a sense of well-being *and* you begin to see what's going on in the mind, how quick the mind is to forget. This is an issue of mindfulness. We have to keep reminding ourselves, again and again and again, that this is where we want to stay. And that requires desire.

So it gets back to that issue of generating desire, reminding yourself of why you want to stay. We all too often think of the processes of meditation as being nothing *but* the present moment, but you've got to think about the long term, both the long term that you've been through so far and the long term that lies ahead of you.

You think about the long term in the past just to remind yourself that if you don't get your act together now, it's just going to be more of the same stuff over and over again. I know a lot of people who say that simply the thought of having to go through public school again is enough to make them not want to come back.

Then you think about the long term ahead of you. What lies in wait? As we chanted just now, there's aging, illness, and death. We haven't gone past them. Are you prepared for them? This is how you prepare: getting some control over the mind.

I was talking today to someone who seemed to have a lot of trouble with this idea. He said, "After all, the ultimate truth is that everything is inconstant, right? So why are you trying to make the mind constant as you meditate?" You're trying to take what is potentially stressful and make it easeful. Something that's out of your control you want to bring into your control. Of course, the constancy and the ease and the control are not absolute. But if you didn't have *some* control over these things, there would be no path, there would be no way out. We use things that are put together to get over to something that's not put together.

Remember the Buddha's image of the raft. It's just twigs and branches and leaves and other things that you can find on this shore to get over to the other shore. You're not expecting some magic boat to come from the other shore to come pick you up. You take what you've got. In other words, you can't use nibbana to get to nibbana. You have to use fabricated things. But it works, just as long as you put them together well, you hold on tight, and you make the effort to go across the river. It *can* be done, it's simply a matter of wanting to do it enough, and then being as wise and discerning in acting on that desire.

We all want happiness. We search for happiness. Sometimes there are people who say that the more you search for happiness, the more it runs away, so if you give up it'll come to you. That's not how it works. Some people say, well, just don't search for happiness because your happiness makes other people miserable in one way or another, so just don't search for happiness at all. That doesn't work, either. There's always part of the mind that's looking for

pleasure, looking for happiness. If we don't satisfy it consciously, it'll exert pressure behind the scenes. So the question is, how do we do it in an open, intelligent way? How do we do it in a compassionate way, so that we cause no harm to ourselves, no harm to other people? It is possible.

So it's largely a matter of taking your desire for true happiness and pointing it in the right direction: reflecting on what works, what doesn't work; what, when you've done it, seemed worth it; what, when you've done it, didn't seem worth it.

And keep on moving in the direction of the greater happiness you find when you give up lesser pleasures. Insight is a value judgment, and although sometimes the judging mind is criticized, if you train it to be a *wise* judging mind, your judicious mind will form a large part of the path.