



Developing Wisdom

It seems easy if you have a good intellect. Just follow the arguments by the great trailblazer, Chandrakirti, about how a chariot – well, let's say a car – is neither inherently its whole, nor inherently one of its parts, nor some combination of whole plus parts, or even none of these. Therefore the chariot/car cannot exist from its own side. It is empty of existing from its own side, which is what we Buddhists mean when we say it is empty of true existence. Not too hard to understand, so why then, are we not quickly enlightened? What is wisdom? Surely when we refer to wise people, we do not mean people who can hold a clever argument. Ven. Tenzin Chönyi (Dr. Diana Taylor) explains¹ ...

Wisdom is a mental factor, meaning it is part of our functioning mind. It is a mental factor which looks at some thing, or some idea, and gets to know its nature, its attributes, and any other characteristics. In other words, it analyzes things. Its purpose is to counteract doubt.

There are two types of wisdom: conventional wisdom and higher wisdom. Conventional wisdom is about being clever, cunning, making good decisions. Shakyamuni Buddha said that what we need is a higher wisdom, a sound philosophy for life. This means that we need, in the first place, a wisdom which distinguishes what brings happiness, and what does not. Secondly we need a wisdom which shows us the actual nature of things, their being empty of existing from their own side.

What brings happiness? We begin to see that it comes from understanding that ordinary life, samsara, is undermined by chronic dissatisfaction. At the same time, it is possible to achieve something better – nirvana – which is

free from this dissatisfaction. We begin to develop renunciation, wanting nirvana. So we begin to investigate what it is that brings nirvana. We begin to see that we need more time, so a good rebirth will help. We start to understand how looking at death teaches us how to live life.

So we start from a position of living a good life, which means, at the least, not harming others; this means that wisdom begins with ethics: how to avoid harming others. How do we do that? The answer is not always clear, which means we need some more conventional wisdom too. Why am I chronically angry, or depressed, or jealous? Western psychology can help with these answers, but Buddhism brings an extra dimension. We learn about how, from beginningless time, we have been craving to protect our ego, because we thought that this would bring happiness. Buddhist wisdom teaches that our ego is a myth we have created.

We need a wisdom which shows us the actual nature of things, their being empty of existing from their own side. We begin to understand how our misconceptions of reality are the root cause of all this dissatisfaction. We want more than a good rebirth. We want enlightenment – complete enlightenment – which includes compassion for any and every being that has not yet understood and achieved this state.

¹ This article is an adaptation of a keynote address by Dr. Ian Coughlan (Jampa Ignjen) – “Developing Wisdom: How to Achieve Understanding and Realization” – given at the conference *Mind and its Potential*, Sydney, 2006. Interested students can contact him at jignjen@hotmail.com

What can help us generate wisdom?

We need more than a good IQ, or even good emotional intelligence. First we need *faith*. This means being convinced about the truthfulness of the Buddhist path: The logic is sound as we can see the positive effects it has had on the people we know, or our teachers. With faith, comes *enthusiasm*: delight, *aspiration*, and willingness to put *effort* into developing wisdom. Those things help us to get on with the study, and to develop patience toward our limitations.

Study is obviously necessary if we want to develop wisdom. First we rely on the knowledge given to us by our teachers but, as we progress, we develop deeper understanding of the meaning of the teachings, and we analyze this meaning, rather than learning by rote. Slowly we progress from being completely wrong, especially in thinking that phenomena exist from their own side (or do not exist at all). As we learn, we develop doubt about our own point of view. We study some more. The doubt leans more toward the correct view, and becomes a correct belief. We trust the teachings, because we have checked them out. We then see, through our own logical analysis, what is right and what is wrong. Now we are ready for the most important stage: insight, i.e., knowing these things, not just from logic, but from our own direct experience.

If we want happiness, we want nirvana, and thus the wisdom we need to develop is the wisdom of the Four Noble Truths: There is suffering. It is caused by our own karma. We can eliminate that suffering. There are methods to help us do this.

I cannot get to Tibet by reading maps, though they will show me the way. I need to actually travel. The 'traveling' part of wisdom begins with ethics. This is the first of the three foundations of Buddhism: ethics, concentration, and wisdom. As we make an effort to live without harming others, then we begin to see how deeply rooted is our own self-grasping. I want to kill the pesky mosquitoes. I do not like smelly dogs. I cannot abide screaming kids at the supermarket. I cannot abide people who criticize my kids when they are playing up. These thoughts are all about me. I give no thought to what might mean happiness to a mosquito, or dog, or a two-year old, or a grumpy granny. Wisdom means the conventional wisdom of knowing better ways to handle these situations. We find these teachings in the Lam Rim, and especially in teachings on thought transformation.

As we learn how to practice ethics more effectively, our minds also become calmer – simply because we are less disturbed by events around us. We have a greater sense of equanimity, of being at peace with whatever karma unfolds. We are ready to develop calm-abiding. The mind is calm

because it is no longer scattered by my delusions and negativities. It can stay focused for a long time without distraction. This is the perfect state of mind for analyzing the extremely subtle idea of emptiness of inherent existence.

As we remain focused with this mind of calm-abiding on the idea of the emptiness of inherent existence, higher wisdom, its truth becomes more and more evident and a direct realization of its profundity hits us at the moment of liberation. At first, it is as if we try to see the lines on our hand on a dark night. There is so much lack of wisdom, we cannot see much. Then we start to understand through logic, and it is as if we are looking at our hand on a clear night. We can see much more detail. When we first know, from our own direct experience, that reality does not exist from its own side, then it is as if we look at our hand in daylight, with a very clear wisdom. There is still more to go, subtle karmic seeds to be known and abandoned. When we achieve that, then it is as if we can see even the fine lines in vibrant detail.

What are the qualities of wise people?

Abraham Maslow² tried to identify the qualities of wise people. He said they felt they had a 'calling,' and that they embodied and loved their values, which included deep spiritual, philosophical, or religious values. More recent research indicates that such people are emotionally resilient, can cope with adversity, and are open to forgiveness and humility. They are compassionate people. We see this in His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and also people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and Mother Teresa.

What would our lives be like then? We would be so filled with deep compassion for all those beings, ordinary people like we are now, that we would have no choice but to do whatever we could to help them. Our wisdom would be so clear that our ways of helping would be incredibly skillful. We would be returning to ethics with a profundity and power that at the moment we can only imagine.

Certainly wisdom is a mental factor, which analyzes things, but if we focus on just that, we miss the whole point. If we want to be wise, then we analyze *and put into practice* those things which lead to wisdom: ethics, concentration, and above all, compassion. ❁

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² Maslow, A.H. (1976) *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Harmondsworth Penguin.