

The Faculty of Wisdom

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 05-26-13.

In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Connected Discourses, the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, there are these five faculties. What five? The faculty of faith, the faculty of energy, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of wisdom. These are the five faculties.

"One who has completed and fulfilled these five faculties is an arahant. If they are weaker than that, one is ... [a non-returner]; if still weaker, a once-returner; if still weaker, a stream-enterer; if still weaker, a Dhamma-follower; if still weaker, a faith-follower.

"Thus, bhikkhus, one who activates them fully succeeds fully; one who activates them partly succeeds partly. The five faculties, bhikkhus, are not barren, so I say." [SN 48.17, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi]

Over the past few weeks we've been exploring these Five Faculties. Today I want to look at the final one, faculty of Wisdom — *paññā* in the Pāli.

Of course wisdom is the crucial factor in our practice, because it is the thing that frees us from delusion so that we are able to meet life skillfully with equanimity, good will and compassion. And it isn't an all-or-nothing quality. The more deeply we study ourselves—the activities of our own bodies, minds and hearts—and study the Buddha's teachings, the more wisdom is developed. Though of the two the one that really matters is studying our own actions, which is why it is so important that we actually do the practice and not just read about it or think about it. It's like the difference between reading and thinking about swimming and actually developing the skill of swimming. If you fall into the water, the later will probably allow you to survive, while it is questionable with the former.

What I'd like to do today is to look at some views of wisdom, and then to try to connect those with our actual practice of applying wisdom to our everyday lived experience.

In the Abhidhamma, the very systematized and abstracted presentation of the Buddha's teachings that comes from the latter phases of Early Buddhism, the faculty of wisdom is

what allows us to know things as they really are, to penetrate or see into the true nature of things. The Abhidhamma says that the function of wisdom is "to illuminate" the objects of attention "like a lamp." So when wisdom is present, we are not bewildered by what we encounter.

In the view of Early Buddhism, wisdom is not a quality that we intrinsically have. It is something that arises when the conditions are right. So wisdom is dependently originated just like all other conditioned states of mind, body and heart. It develops because a number of conditions are in place, such as the steps of the Eightfold Path, or the Factors of Awakening, or in this case the other four Faculties: faith, energy or effort, mindfulness and concentration.

[Source re Abhidhamma: Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993, p. 90.]

But the closest cause of wisdom is said to be wise, appropriate or careful attention (*yoniso manasikāra*). This is one of the things the Buddha said about wise attention.

"Bhikkhus, in regard to internal factors, I do not perceive another single factor so helpful as wise attention for a bhikkhu who is a learner, who has not attained perfection but lives aspiring for the supreme security from bondage. Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who wisely attends abandons what is unwholesome and develops what is wholesome." [Itivuttaka 16, trans. John Ireland]

So when we are attending wisely, we recognize the unwholesome or unskillful as unwholesome and we abandon it. And we recognize the wholesome or skillful as skillful and we develop it.

What the Buddha said about wise attention leads us to the Connected Discourses [*Samyutta Nikāya*] where the Buddha gives us a little more sense of the content and activity of wisdom.

"And what, bhikkhus, is the faculty of wisdom? Here, bhikkhus, the noble disciple is wise; he possesses wisdom directed to arising and passing away, which is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of suffering. He understands as it really is: 'This is suffering.' He understands as it really is: 'This is the origin of suffering.' He understands as it really is: 'This is the cessation of suffering.' He understands as it really is: 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' This is called the faculty of wisdom." [SN 48.10, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi]

So when wisdom is really present we're noticing the arising and passing away of each moment — impermanence. It isn't just a conceptual understanding such as standing in front of a mirror and saying to ourselves "Oh, my skin is more wrinkled. Well that's impermanence." We're noticing it. We're seeing arising and passing happen in the present moment.

And when wisdom is really present we understand each of the Four Noble Truths "as it really is." In his very first discourse, what is now called the discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma [*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*], and then for the next 45 years of teaching, the Buddha talked about these four truths.

In these next quotes from that sutta, I'm going to use the Pāli word *dukkha* rather than an English translation, because the word usually used, "suffering," is only one aspect of what *dukkha* refers to. More basically *dukkha* means that something is unreliable, or ultimately undependable or ultimately unsatisfactory.

So the Buddha said:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of *dukkha*: birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, illness is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; union with what is displeasing is *dukkha*; separation from what is pleasing is *dukkha*; not to get what one wants is *dukkha*; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are *dukkha*."

The Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging are:

1. Form -- the material aspect of experience including our bodies;
2. Feeling -- the pleasant, unpleasant and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant tone of experience;
3. Perception -- the simple memory and recognition of something as, say "tree" rather than "sign post";
4. Mental Formations or Fabrications -- all of our mental activities or actions which help to create the world we inhabit; and
5. Consciousness -- the simple knowing that occurs when a sensory object impinges on a sensory organ, including thoughts impinging on the mind. It's a momentary phenomenon that arises and passes as conditions change.

So when the Buddha says "the five aggregates subject to clinging are *dukkha*, he is telling us that everything we encounter that is dependent on conditions is *dukkha* or ultimately unsatisfactory as a refuge from the travails of life.

Then the Buddha tells us what we're supposed to do with each Noble Truth; he tells us how we're supposed to practice with it:

"This noble truth of *dukkha* is to be fully understood."

The Second Noble Truth:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of *dukkha*: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence [or becoming] accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence [or becoming], craving for extermination [or non-becoming]."

"This noble truth of the origin of *dukkha* is to be abandoned."

In other words, our practice is to recognize the craving for sensual pleasures, the desire for our lives to be different from they are —whether imagining a happier time or just wishing to escape what life is now— and having recognized the craving, to abandon it.

The Third Noble Truth:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha*: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it."

"This noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha* is to be realized."

So we're supposed to realize —to make real in our own lives— the remainderless fading away of *dukkha*. I like this word "fading." Cessation doesn't have to happen all at once, but as it happens gradually we should be sure to notice it, to appreciate it, to find joy in it. We should realize when we are free of *dukkha* and the causes of it, whether for a moment for more permanently.

And the Fourth Truth:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*: it is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

"This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha* is to be developed."

[SN 56.11, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, lighter text added by this author.]

So these Four Noble Truths are not meant to be philosophical beliefs. They are, instead, very practical tools for relating to life in a way that will lead to our long-term benefit and happiness.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu has recently presented the Four Noble Truths in a slightly different way that you might find useful:

1st Noble Truth: **"The mind experiences stress and suffering."**

2nd Noble Truth: **"The stress and suffering come from the way the mind shapes its experience through its actions driven by ignorance [of the way things are]."**

3rd Noble Truth: **"That ignorance can be ended, opening your awareness to an unconditioned dimension free of stress and suffering."**

4th Noble Truth: **"That dimension, even though it's unconditioned, can be reached by training the mind in the skillful qualities of virtue, concentration, and discernment [in other words, wisdom]."**

[Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, "Basic Premises," *With Each and Every Breath*, Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013, epub edition, p. 24., lighter text added by this author]

In the moments when the ignorance is ended or at least momentarily lessened, we see things as they are. And part of what that means is:

- seeing the arising and passing of that moment—its impermanence;
- as well as seeing its unreliable and ultimately unsatisfactory nature—that it is *dukkha*;
- and seeing that it is not-self. In other words, seeing that there is no substantial enduring essence or core to whatever is encountered, which also means seeing that what is encountered is not I, me, or mine. Not who I am. Not what I am. Not a possession of mine.

And now, in the last bit from the suttas for today, the Buddha offers us a little more about this aspect of wisdom, which will be helpful when we begin to apply it to our experience. In the part of the sutta I'm going to quote he is speaking of the aggregate of form, the material aspect of experience, including our bodies. So "form" is in reference to our experiences of solidity, fluidity, heat and cold, pressure, movement, vibration and so forth which we regard as form whether in this body or this floor or a tree or whatever material aspect we encounter.

In what is regarded as the second discourse the Buddha offered when he began teaching, the discourse on not-self [*Anattā-lakkhana Sutta*], the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, form is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.' But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus.' [Then he repeats this in terms of the other four aggregates - feeling, perception, mental formations/fabrications and consciousness.]

"What do you think, bhikkhus, is form permanent or impermanent? — 'Impermanent, venerable sir.' — Is what is impermanent *dukkha* or happiness? — *Dukkha*, venerable sir.' — Is what is impermanent, *dukkha*, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self?' — 'No, venerable sir.'"

[SN 22.59, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, except that the Pāli *dukkha* has been used in place of the word "suffering" to suggest the range of qualities of unreliability, ultimate unsatisfactoriness, stress, struggle and suffering.]

He's telling us that whatever is impermanent is an unreliable source of happiness, even though it may be temporarily pleasant; and that one of the criteria for regarding something as self, as fit for regarding as part of I, me or mine, is that we should be able to control it. And when we're able to see the impermanence and the *dukkha* quality of what we're encountering, then we will also understand that it cannot be controlled, so it can't be I, me or mine.

So what does it look like when we apply wise attention and the activities of the Four Noble Truths to our lives? It involves exploring/opening to the places in our own lives that are difficult for us -- the gnawing desires; the unpleasantness that comes unbidden; being separated from what is pleasing; the frustrated desires; the embarrassments; our imperfections; the shame of what we've done or wanted to do or failed to do, and so forth.

As an example, let's say that we have a friend, or a colleague, or family member, or employer or employee, who has done something that affects us in a way that is quite painful. When we look at this from the perspective of "I, me or mine", we may feel hurt, injured, victimized, betrayed in some way. And associated with that there may be grief, anger and maybe even thoughts of retaliation, or revenge. Or perhaps just thoughts of escape or avoidance, but often that isn't possible. So we're stuck in it and with it.

When we are operating from the perspective of I, me or mine, each time the hurt comes into awareness, or is stimulated again by circumstances, maybe we get caught in obsessive thinking about what we should do, how we should respond, or outrage of 'how could they have done that!' We're re-living it. We're making it real once again. And maybe it feels like there are only two choices -- to be the good and long suffering victim who puts up with it, or to be the mean bastard who retaliates in some way. But either way, it is kind of like what the Tibetan teacher, Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, said

"When you give in to aversion and anger, it's as though, having decided to kill someone by throwing him into a river, you wrap your arms around his neck, jump into the water with him, and you both drown. In destroying your enemy, you destroy yourself as well."

[Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, "Putting Down the Arrow," Tricycle Daily Dharma, May 19, 2013]

So whether we're the long-suffering angel or the one retaliating, when we identify with the hurt, when we grasp it, when we act, mentally, verbally or physically from that "I" or "me" position, it is like we are grasping our own necks, we're agitating our own minds and hearts again and again. It is like we are destroying ourselves.

But there is an alternative. When we found ourselves obsessing about what happened, struggling with the situation in some way, what if we took that obsession, that struggle as a sign a reminder that The First Noble Truth is to be known, to be penetrated.

This is where we falter so much in our lives, because who wants to know this yucky stuff! It's painful! It hurts! We just want to get away from the unpleasantness of it. So we do all kinds of things to avoid this edge of our comfort zone. We do all kinds of things to distract us or to try to seek some kind of comfort elsewhere. "Ooh a piece of chocolate would feel good, that will make me happy." ... or a cup of coffee ... or some ice cream ... or some sex ... or some new shoes ... or, or, or

Now don't get me wrong, sometimes it is indeed necessary to temporarily step away from the edge, sometimes it is necessary to calm and collect ourselves, before we can more clearly and consciously approach the edge rather than just being reactive to it. But in time, what we will need to do, what will help is to first recognize, to open to, to admit to ourselves that "this is suffering, this is *dukkha*." It means we have to allow ourselves to actually experience and clearly know "this is suffering," "this hurts." "This hurts" without a "me" attached to the end of it. Simply, "This is what suffering is. This is what *dukkha* is."

It doesn't mean there is something wrong with me. It doesn't necessarily mean I did anything wrong or was a failure. It just means that I am human and I'm experiencing what it is like to be human. Sometimes there is suffering in this life. The things we normally invest ourselves in -- including our spiritual teachers and spiritual communities -- are conditioned phenomena and are inherently unreliable, ultimately unsatisfactory.

Having clearly recognized and experienced that "this is *dukkha*," we begin to apply the 2nd Noble Truth — the knowledge that holding on, pushing away or wanting life to be other than it is leads to *dukkha*. Gradually we begin to learn for ourselves that when these initial thoughts or feelings about being betrayed, about being victimized arise, if we take them to be "I or me or mine" if we get caught up in blaming the you who did this to me, it just leads to more agitation in the mind and heart, to more suffering.

When there's a clear recognition that "this is suffering," the letting go, the abandoning is often automatic, like pulling the hand away from a hot stove. But whether it is automatic or not, we have the option of beginning to see this as an event, as "there's that thought/feeling/mood again and if I go with it, it only means trouble."

It's kind of like if we're involved in a relationship with someone who we love, but we know if we continue with them it only means more hurt and suffering. We know they are trouble and so we have to disengage, even though there may still be a draw, an attraction there.

So we begin relating to it as an event rather than as who I am. Whether we conceptualize it this way or not, we recognize the not-self nature of this. This gives a quality of spaciousness that allows us to respond in other ways. And slowly we learn that we can just let it come and go, we can let it be what it is, impermanent. In other words, we can just allow it to arise and pass without getting entangled in it. And we begin to experience it with equanimity. We realize, and recognize for ourselves, the 3rd Noble Truth, at least for this moment, that *dukkha* has ceased.

And so by developing our Faith — faith in the Wisdom of the teachings and in our own ability to see and know things as they are—we have the courage and trust to make the Effort to respond differently. We use the tools of Mindfulness and Concentration to see and know as clearly as we can what is really occurring, and we step outside of our comfort zones, we open to the *dukkha* without taking it personally. We see that it is conditional and impermanent. We let go and experience the ease of mind and heart that comes with the

fading away of *dukkha*. This is what happens as we develop and apply these Five Faculties to our lives.