

Knowing and Living the Truth: The Perfection of *Wisdom*

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Introduction

The Paramis

Wisdom (sometimes called “discernment”) is one of the ten “paramis” or perfections of a Bodhisattva, a highly Awakened person who postpones his or her ultimate enlightenment to bring all beings to liberation.

These ten characteristics of a Bodhisattva include: generosity (*dana*), virtue (*sila*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), **wisdom** (*pañña*), energy/persistence (*viriya*), patience/forbearance (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhitthana*), good will (*metta*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). (The links are to the wonderful Access to Insight website, for more information.)

In their most complete expression, the paramis are combined with compassion and skillfulness, and they are untainted by any kind of craving, self-centeredness, or positional views.

(Because the meaning of “wisdom” – compared to that of “discernment” – is broader in English and closer to the sense in which this notion is used in Buddhist practice, that’s the word that will be used in this article.)

Developing the Best in Yourself

Of course, these qualities of enlightened people are present to some degree in us all. Even without being – or even aspiring to be – a Bodhisattva, it is a wonderful thing both to express these qualities as they already exist, and to cultivate them further in your mind and heart, in your thoughts and words and deeds. You are *perfecting* – progressively, step by step, in the mud and sludge and slog sometimes of daily life – wholesome qualities or faculties, for your own sake, and for the sake of others.

Ways to Approach This Article

You can read this article within a Buddhist framework or simply for its reflections on the deeply human and everyday matter of seeking some semblance of wisdom – even perhaps to the point of profound understanding.

(A note on this text: Words such as “parami” are from Pali, the language in which the earliest surviving discourses of the Buddha were written. Some of this text is adapted from the Access to Insight site, to which great acknowledgement is offered. In particular, I’ve quoted extensively [with minor edits] from Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of *A Treatise on the Paramis [From the Commentary to the Cariyapitaka]* by Acariya Dhammapala; that text is shown in this font.)

What is Wisdom?

Wisdom in General

The dictionary describes wisdom as the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment. Pertinent synonyms include: sagacity, sense, common sense, astuteness, judiciousness, and prudence.

The opposite of wisdom is not stupidity, but foolishness. Many very bright people are not very wise, and many people of average intelligence carry a deep wisdom.

What are you wise about in your own life?

Wisdom in Buddhism

In Buddhism, wisdom is one of the three major pillars of practice, the other two being virtue (*sila*) and meditative depth (*samadhi*).

Of these, wisdom is seen as most central, since this is what dispels ignorance. For it is ignorance, not “sin” in a religious sense, which is regarded in Buddhism as the true root of all that is harmful or evil. (Other terms used for this ignorance are delusion, confusion, and self-deception.)

For example, while concentration in meditation is seen as an essential skill, that alone will not carry a person to the farthest shore. One must also have insight – vipassana – and that’s what is ultimately transformative. (Though, to be sure, deep concentration is a great facilitator of liberating insight.)

Wisdom is vital because it peers through the veils of ignorance, confusion, and illusion into the heart of these three fundamental characteristics of existence:

- Everything changes. Therefore, nothing is permanent. Not a thought, not a life, not the Hawaiian islands, not the Earth itself.
- Everything is connected to and interdependent with everything else. Therefore, nothing has an inherent, absolute self-identity. Not an electron, not a tendril of foam on the sea, not a redwood tree, not your body or mind or “I.”
- Everybody suffers.

In Buddhism, the measure of true wisdom is its practical effectiveness, not its abstract or theoretical correctness. Since the overriding aim of Buddhism is the end of suffering, the essence of wisdom is knowing what leads to happiness for oneself and others, and what does not . . . knowing what’s wholesome and what isn’t . . . knowing which tunnels have the cheese and which do not.

Wisdom sees that clinging leads to suffering every time. To paraphrase the Buddha: “I offer one thing: wisdom that knows how to suffer no more.”

To say this a little differently, wisdom means a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths. As it says in the Samyutta Nikaya (8): *Where can the faculty of wisdom be seen (at its best)? In the Four Noble Truths.*

The utter penetration into those Truths is the sphere of Nibbana; enlightenment is the perfection of wisdom. That is why wisdom is considered perhaps the most fundamental of the ten “paramis” or perfections.

Six Aspects of Wisdom

Introduction

As you read through these aspects of wisdom, you might like to consider how they manifest in your own life – and whether you’d be served by focusing on one or more of them to develop in particular.

Consciousness, awareness, “wit”

Someone who is unconscious cannot possibly be wise. It’s interesting that the root of the word, “wise,” is “wit.” Not wit as in Robin Williams or Oscar Wilde, but wit as in “having your wits about you,” or “he lost his wits.”

Penetration, illumination

Wisdom has the characteristic of penetrating the real specific nature (of phenomena), like the penetration of an arrow shot by a skillful archer; its function is to illuminate the objective field, like a lamp; its manifestation is non-confusion, like a guide in a forest.

The king then asked: "What then is the mark of *wisdom*?" — "It illuminates." — "And how does wisdom illuminate?" — "When wisdom arises, it dispels the darkness of ignorance, generates the illumination of knowledge, and makes the holy truths stand out clearly. Thereafter the yogin, with his or her correct wisdom, can see impermanence, suffering, and not-self." — "Give me a comparison." — "It is like a lamp which a man or woman would take into a dark house. It would dispel the darkness, would illuminate, shed light, and make the forms in the house stand out clearly." — "Well put, Venerable Nagasena." — *Milindapañha*, pp. 51-62; translated by Edward Conze, and edited slightly

Greed, hatred, and delusion create blindness, while wisdom restores sight. Just as light cannot coexist with darkness, wisdom cannot coexist with delusion.

Seeing Context, Connections, and Causes

Wisdom means seeing the big picture. It is the antithesis of tunnel vision, narrow mindedness, missing the forest for the trees.

Wisdom is relational. It connects the dots, sees the patterns, recognizes the deer in the brush from a flicker of white in shadow.

Wisdom understands what the Buddha called dependent origination, a pithy term for the simple fact that everything that is, is part of one whole web of existence. As it says in the suttas: “This coming into existence, that comes into existence. This being, that is. This disappearing, that disappears. This not existing, that does not exist.”

More than anything, wisdom sees what hurts and what helps. To put that in a Buddhist context: Through the power of wisdom, noble beings fully comprehend the processes of origination and cessation [the causes of suffering and the end of suffering].

The Buddha’s great awakening was characterized most essentially by him seeing that:

This is suffering... This is the origination of suffering... This is the cessation of suffering... This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering...

Or to quote Shantideva, the great Tibetan sage: *My view is as vast as the heavens, and my attention to the laws of Karma is as fine as a grain of barley flour.*

Knowing What’s Important

Wisdom keeps its eyes on the prize. It knows what matters most. There is no wisdom in the absence of deeply considered values and priorities. To be wise, you must be prepared to say, “I value this over that.”

Balance and Perspective

Wisdom takes the long view.

Skillful Action

Wisdom *acts*. That activity may be entirely internal, or it may be the activity of restraint, but it is action nonetheless.

In other words, wisdom is nothing if it is not *engaged* with the mind and the world.

Benefits of Wisdom

General

As noted, it is wisdom that leads to the end of suffering.

Only by means of wisdom can he or she remain indifferent to the vicissitudes of the world, such as gain and loss, without being affected by them.

In Support of the Other Paramis

Wisdom is the chief cause for the practice of the other paramis. Having fortified herself with the power of wisdom, the wise woman forms an unshakeable determination to undertake all the paramis.

Wisdom transforms giving (and the other nine virtues) into requisites of enlightenment.

Without wisdom, the virtues such as giving [one of the paramis] do not become purified and cannot perform their respective functions.

For example, energy [one of the paramis] devoid of wisdom does not accomplish the purpose desired since it is wrongly aroused, and it is better not to arouse energy at all than to arouse it in the wrong way. But when energy is conjoined with wisdom, there is nothing it cannot accomplish.

Similarly, only the person of wisdom can patiently [one of the paramis] tolerate the wrongs of others, not the dull-witted person. In the person lacking wisdom, the wrongs of others only provoke impatience; but for the wise, they call his or her patience into play and make it grow even stronger.

Again, without wisdom, virtue [one of the paramis] cannot be severed from craving, and therefore cannot reach purification, much less serve as the foundation for the qualities of an omniscient Buddha.

Furthermore, without wisdom, one cannot achieve concentration, and without concentration one cannot secure one's own welfare, much less provide for the welfare of others.

Therefore a bodhisattva, practicing for the welfare of others, should admonish himself: "Have you made a thorough effort to purify your wisdom?"

Wisdom and Compassion

Through wisdom the Bodhisattva brings himself across the stream, through compassion he leads others across.

Through wisdom she understands the suffering of others, through compassion she strives to alleviate their suffering.

Through wisdom she aspires for Nibbana, through compassion she remains in the round of existence.

Through compassion he enters samsara, through wisdom he does not delight in it.

Through wisdom she destroys all attachments, but because her wisdom is accompanied by compassion she never desists from activity that benefits others.

Through compassion she shakes with sympathy for all, but because her compassion is accompanied by wisdom her mind is unattached.

Through wisdom he is free from "I-making" and "mine-making," through compassion he is free from lethargy and depression.

For when their wisdom-eyes open up, the great bodhisattvas give even their own limbs and organs without extolling themselves and disparaging others. They give devoid of discrimination, filled with joy.

Only the person of wisdom is skillful in providing for the welfare of all beings, without discriminating between dear people, neutrals, and enemies.

Impediments to Wisdom

Discriminating thoughts of "I" and "mine" are the defilement of the perfection of wisdom.

These are the causes of delusion: discontent, languor, drowsiness, lethargy, attachment to sleep, irresoluteness, lack of enthusiasm for knowledge, false over-estimation of oneself, non-investigation, not maintaining one's body properly, lack of mental concentration, not ministering to those possessed of wisdom, self-contempt, adherence to perverted views, lack of a sense of spiritual urgency, and the five

hindrances; or, in brief, any states which, when indulged in, prevent the unarisen wisdom from arising and cause the arisen wisdom to diminish.

How to Develop Wisdom

Wisdom Born of Learning

The sphere of Buddhist learning includes the five aggregates, the four truths, the foundations of mindfulness, etc., as well as any blameless secular fields of knowledge which may be suitable for promoting the welfare and happiness of beings.

Thus, with wisdom, a bodhisattva should first thoroughly immerse herself in this entire sphere of learning, and then she should establish others in learning.

Wisdom Born of Reflection

Then he should develop wisdom born of reflection by first reflecting upon the specific nature of phenomena such as the aggregates, and then arousing reflective acquiescence in them.

Wisdom Born of Meditation

There is no [ultimate] wisdom in the absence of meditation (*jhana*), since concentration is the proximate cause of wisdom.

Therefore, one should perfect the wisdom born of meditation by developing a full understanding of all internal and external phenomena without exception as follows: "This is mere mentality-materiality, which arises and ceases according to conditions. There is here no agent or actor. It is impermanent in the sense of not being after having been; it is suffering in the sense of oppression by rise and fall; and it is non-self in the sense of being unsusceptible to the exercise of mastery."

Comprehending them in this way, the person abandons attachment to them, and helps others to do so as well. Entirely out of compassion, he continues to help his fellow beings . . . and does not desist until he reaches the very peak of wisdom and all the Buddha-qualities come within his grasp.

Cultivating Wisdom in the Modern World

The Machinery of Confusion and Illusion

- Floods of input. Not what evolution intended.
 - Endlessly fanning the flames of desire
 - A culture of consumerism
 - Glorification of self, me, I
- Do not underestimate the world of wonders. The cloaks of Mara.

I See You, Mara

The key to breaking through the fog is to recognize it as fog.

Address the ways that your faculties of apprehension may have been suppressed or blunted in childhood or by your culture. One of the first things a tyranny works to do is to undermine and punish the naming of the truth.

Steadiness of Mind

This is what holds the spotlight of awareness stably on what actually is, and what keeps wisdom about what is stably in the forefront of your mind.

The world today is so incredibly *distracting* that we need more steadiness than ever.

Sila

We all know at least one thing that “fool-mind” thinks will make us happy, but wise mind knows will not.

In a media world designed by the greatest minds of our generation to breed lust and greed in every nook and cranny of your mind, can you walk through a mall or supermarket or Sharper Image catalog without being tugged in a thousand directions?

Can you guard the sense doors?

Can you watch the movement of desire in your mind? The stimulus . . . the pleasant feeling tone . . . the hopefulness that this will bring pleasure . . . the craving . . . the clinging . . . the frustration that it’s not so great or impossible to have or fleeting anyway . . . the suffering.

Aiming for Continuity of Wisdom

Helping wisdom sink in. Paying attention to what you realize. Journaling, telling others, collecting insights and admonitions, collages, making commitments, adopting practices.

Fertilizing wisdom below your conscious mind. That's where the great repository of wisdom resides.

Finding refuges. Taking refuge.

Doing What You Can

Taking the long view – perhaps lifetimes worth