

# Wisdom for Dummies

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If you read a lot of books about the Dhamma, it can get pretty confusing after a while, for there are so many different takes on exactly what the Dhamma is. On top of that, there are people who will tell you it's all very complex, very subtle; only a very erudite scholar or subtle logician could figure it all out. With so many teachings, it's hard to figure out which ones to hold onto. Of course, some people will tell you that you can't hold onto anything at all. That makes it even more confusing and obscure.

So it's good to remember that the Buddha himself taught the Dhamma in very simple terms. And all the teachings derived from a few very basic, very commonsensical principles. You might call it wisdom for dummies: the kind of wisdom that comes from looking at what's actually going on in your life, asking some very basic questions, and applying a few very basic principles to solve your big problems.

When you use wisdom for dummies, it doesn't mean you're dumb. It means you recognize that you've been foolish and you want to wise up. As the Buddha once said, when you recognize your foolishness, you are to that extent wise. This may sound obvious, but when you think about it, you see that it teaches you some important things about wisdom. In fact, the realization that you've been foolish contains within itself many of the basic principles of the Dhamma. To begin with, this kind of realization usually comes to you when you see you've made a mistake you could have avoided. In recognizing that much, you recognize that your actions do make a difference: Some actions are more skillful than others. In recognizing that the mistake came from your foolishness, you recognize the principle that your ideas and intentions played a role in your actions, and that you could have operated under other ideas and intentions. You could have been wiser—the mistake wasn't preordained—and you've got something to learn. That right there is the beginning of wisdom.

When you're willing to learn from your foolish mistakes, the Buddha can teach you more about what it means to be wise. Start with one of his basic ways of distinguishing a wise person from a fool: If you're a wise person, you tend to your own responsibilities and avoid the things you're not responsible for. If you're a fool, you tend to ignore the things you're responsible for, and to focus on

things you're not responsible for. This is probably the number one principle, because it cuts out a lot of other issues, such as taking a stand on where the universe came from, or if the universe came from anything, whether it's finite or infinite; what your inner nature is. A lot of what we think of as metaphysical issues get put aside this way, because you're not really responsible for those issues. And what are you responsible for? Your actions, what you're choosing to do. No one else can make your choices for you, so you have to focus on doing them well.

This is why the Buddha says that wisdom starts growing when you ask someone who's knowledgeable, "What's skillful? What's unskillful? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" Why are these questions wise? Because they come from seeing that the issue of how to find a worthwhile happiness is something you really are responsible for. Happiness is preferable to suffering, it depends on your actions, and long-term happiness is better than short-term. This is what's meant by "skillful."

The distinction between skillful and unskillful is another basic principle. Once one of the Buddha's lay students was accosted by someone from another tradition who asked him, "Well now, does your teacher teach about the origin of universe, or whether it's finite or infinite?" He went down the list of the big issues of the time, and the lay student kept saying, "No, he doesn't talk about any of those things." And the other person responded, "Well, in that case he's a nihilist. He doesn't teach anything at all." So the lay student said, "No, that's not true. He does teach the difference between what's skillful and what's not." He later went to report this conversation to the Buddha, who approved of what he had said.

The distinction between skillful and unskillful forms the basis for the four noble truths. When you dig deep down into why people suffer, you find that it's because of craving. How can people stop suffering? By developing the path, which is primarily composed of good qualities of mind. So you realize the mind has to be trained. That's another basic principle of wisdom: that true happiness comes from training the mind, because the mind is what makes the choices. That's why we meditate. And that's why meditation requires that we focus our attention on the present moment, because these choices are being made right now.

This again brings up the distinction between short-term and long-term happiness. Not all your choices are between doing something harmful and something not harmful. Sometimes the choice is between two things that are relatively harmless, but one leads to short-term, and the other to long-term

happiness. You have only a limited amount of time, a limited amount of energy, so you don't want to get distracted by the short-term things. Now, part of the mind likes doing things that lead to long-term suffering because they provide happiness in the short-term. Sometimes it'll deny the long-term suffering, or else it'll feel that the quick fix is worth the trade. Then there are other things, difficult in the short-term, that lead to long-term happiness down the line. So you need strategies and tactics for getting the mind to avoid the things that you like doing that are going to be harmful in the long-term and to get yourself to do the things that may be difficult now but will give you long-term happiness. This, too, the Buddha said, is a basic measure of your wisdom.

One of these strategies is developing the brahma-viharas. Remind yourself that you want to be kind to yourself. You want to be kind to other people. This is an attitude you want to develop because it helps you. When you're facing a short-term happiness that leads to long-term suffering either for yourself or other people, it really helps to have this attitude of kindness already developed in the mind. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to develop these attitudes ahead of time. Having the breath as a way of training yourself to be kind to yourself is an important aspect of developing goodwill: It helps you realize that you really do have a role in shaping your present experience, starting with the breath and then moving into other areas of the present. There's nobody forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way, or in a way that puts you to sleep, or in a way that gets you anxious and on edge. And yet we allow these things to happen because we're distracted, often about things that are really none of our business. But the breath is something that really is your responsibility. Nobody else can breathe for you. And nobody else can tell you what kind of breathing is going to be comfortable. You have to pay attention yourself.

So this is another area where you really are responsible. And it does have a huge impact. If the mind has a sense of inner wellbeing, you're operating from a position of strength. You don't have to be a slave to things outside. You don't have to let the mind be shaken by things outside. You have a different source for happiness that comes from within. You're coming from a position of strength, which means that you're in a better position to act in skillful ways.

At the same time, you get more and more sensitive to one of the big principles in the workings of cause and effect, the principle that informs all the basic principles of wisdom and discernment: the fact that some causes have an effect over time, some have an effect immediately, and some have both. When you're facing any experience in the present moment, part of it comes from past actions, and part from things you're doing right now. You aren't currently responsible for the things coming from past actions, but you are responsible for the things

coming from your present actions. It takes sensitivity to figure out which is which, but if you can develop that sensitivity, it gives you a handle on things. You may be experiencing pain right now, but you don't have to suffer from it. The choices you're making right now are the ones deciding whether you'll suffer or not.

This is where the distinction between what you're responsible for and what you're not shows its more subtle side. If there's pain coming from past actions, it's dukkha in the context of the three characteristics. It's just part of the way things are. The suffering you're adding, though, is dukkha in the four noble truths, which doesn't have to be there. It comes from your craving, and that's something you can do something about. There may be pain in the body, there may be undesirable thoughts coming up in the mind, but as you focus more carefully in the present moment, you begin to realize that you choose where to focus and how you want to shape the situation. You could let yourself suffer, fall victim to these things, or you could make a change.

This point is often misunderstood. When you read the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness out of context, it's possible to interpret them as saying that when you're being mindful, say, of feelings, you just watch whatever feeling comes up and don't make any changes. Don't meddle with it. Just be non-reactive, allowing whatever's happening to happen. What this attitude does, though, is to drive underground some really important sources for insight: the ability to see to what extent you're shaping your feelings of pleasure and pain right now. This applies to physical pleasure and mental pleasure, to physical pain and mental pain. So when the Buddha talks about the things you do that lead to happiness, he's not referring just to your external actions. He's referring also to the way you think, the way you interpret, filter, make choices about how to shape the present moment: a purely internal matter.

Mindfulness is to remind you that you can make choices, and that you want to learn to make them skillfully. You can learn how to breathe in a comfortable way, to think in a comfortable way, to fashion your thoughts and your perceptions so as to shape a greater sense of wellbeing. You don't have to invest any money. Just take time and use your powers of observation. That's what it all comes down to.

These are very simple things, very simple principles we're operating on. What the Buddha does is to take these very simple principles and follow them through, to see what their implications are. It's wise to realize that you're responsible for some things and not for others. This applies whenever you're experiencing stress: You have to ask yourself, "Is this something coming from the past or from something I'm actually doing right now?" You focus on the issue of how you're

creating suffering for yourself right now, and how you can develop new habits that create the causes for happiness.

As you follow through with this, you begin to get more and more sensitive to where you're creating unnecessary suffering. This is how that question on skillfulness begins to translate into the three perceptions, or what are sometimes called the three characteristics. As the question says, you're looking for "my long-term welfare and happiness." When you give rise to happiness in the present moment, you focus on whether it's long-term or short-term. You notice that if it's short-term—if it changes, if it's inconstant—you can't rely on it as your true happiness. It's stressful. So why would you want to lay claim to it as you or yours? In these ways, these three perceptions help to become your principles for judging what's working and what's not. If it's inconstant, it's not long-term; it's stressful. If it's stressful, it's not happiness. And if it's not happiness, you can't hold onto it as your long-term welfare and happiness.

But the follow-up question is, "Is this a stressful cause that will eventually lead to long-term happiness, or just a cause of more stress?" Remember to keep this point in mind as well. If it's solidly pleasant in terms of its result, you put up with the stress and pain of the action. But if it leads to long-term suffering, it's something you want to drop. You tell yourself, "This is not what I'm looking for." It's like going into a place where you can pan for gold. You want to have standards for what you're looking for as you pan for the gold there. You're looking for certain colors, certain characteristics, that indicate genuine nuggets of gold. Any gravel or flashy fool's gold that doesn't meet those standards, you just throw away, throw away, throw away.

But as for the pan in which you're swilling the gold around, even though it's not gold, you don't throw it away yet. In other words, even though the qualities you develop in terms of virtue, concentration, discernment are not ultimately what you're looking for, they do help you find what you're looking for. When you're looking at the results of your actions, you want to have some way of separating the gold from the gravel and dross, so you need the pan. It's not not-self just yet.

Ultimately, when you apply the perception of not-self to let go of everything, it's still a question of knowing what is your responsibility and what's not. You let go of everything you've been identifying with because you're looking for the highest happiness. The quest for happiness is your responsibility; everything else at that point—even your innermost sense of who you are and who's been following the path—is not. But once you've done that final act of letting go, you don't have to be responsible for anything. The ultimate happiness looks after

itself, and you're finished with your duties on the path. As the Buddha says, the holy life is completed, the task done.

In this way, when you follow through with all the basic principles of wisdom, you find that they explain everything in the Buddha's teachings. You focus on what's your responsibility and you realize your responsibility is the fact that you're creating unnecessary suffering. But you can also be responsible for creating long-term happiness.

Then you use the Buddha's teachings as tools to help you realize that if there's something you want to do but you know it's going to cause harm, you need some help in learning how to talk yourself out of it. As for good things that are difficult—as when it's difficult to be generous, difficult to be virtuous, or difficult to meditate—you need ways of helping yourself get over the hump: tools, strategies, ways of thinking that make it easier, so that you can let go of the unskillful things you like, and arrive at that true happiness, which ultimately lies beyond even wisdom.

This kind of happiness is the fourth of what the Buddha called the four ariya-dhammas, the four noble Dhammas: virtue, concentration, discernment, and release. The first three factors in the list all aim at release, and then—when they've done their work—they get put aside. Even wisdom gets put aside. You put down your gold-pan for you've found all the gold you need. But until that point, you want to learn how to use it. The important point is to remember that the most useful wisdom is the basic kind: just following these basic principles to see how far they can take you as you get more and more sensitive to what the right questions are, and finding more and more skillful ways of answering those questions. So hold onto the pan, even though it may not be pretty or fancy, and simply learn how to use it with greater and greater skill.

That, basically, is wisdom for dummies: the wisdom for people who recognize that they've been foolish and that they don't want to keep on being foolish. That means that they aren't fools; they simply see that they've been fools—an important difference. They're the kind of fools who aren't really dumb.

The real dummies are those who think that they're already smart, and that the only wisdom good enough for them has to be counterintuitive: hidden essences, mysterious teachings that don't make sense. But the Buddha didn't teach that way. He simply taught basic principles for people who want to wise up: The first principle is to realize that your actions are important, that they make a difference, that they come from your ideas and intentions, and that they can be changed for the better. Second, focus on what really is your responsibility, and let go of things that are not. Third, train your mind to develop better and better answers to the question that focuses on what you're really responsible for: what

you can do that will lead to your long-term welfare and happiness. Then take advantage of the tools the Buddha offers to make it easier to give up the things you like doing that are harmful, and to get yourself to do the things that are difficult but will lead to the long-term happiness you want.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image to illustrate this point: A person goes to a mountain and comes back with a big hunk of rock to get the gold ore out of it. Another person, who assumes he's smart, sees the first person doing that and says, "What kind of fool would want a big hunk of rock? I just want the gold." So he carries a pick to the mountain to dig out the gold—but he doesn't get any gold, because gold doesn't come out of the rock that way. You have to take the rock, put it into the smelter, and heat it. That's when the gold comes out. The silver comes out. All these other minerals come out on their own when they reach their melting point. The heat here stands for the effort of your practice. You're willing to put in the effort to separate what's skillful from what's not. That's how you get the gold.

Another analogy is climbing a tree. You can't climb the tree from the top down, starting with subtle concepts and advanced treatises. You have to start from the bottom, admitting to yourself, "There's a lot I don't know, and I can't figure it out just by reading, but I can figure it out by watching what I'm doing and seeing what's working to give long-term happiness." If you're willing to be the sort of person who doesn't have things all figured out ahead of time, but you know that you've got some good tools and you're willing to learn how to use them well: That's how you'll get to where you want to go.