

The Wisdom of Ardency

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All of the factors of the path build on right view, which means that they all contain an element of discernment or wisdom. The question sometimes arises: Where in the practice of right mindfulness is the element of wisdom? There's a general tendency to see it in the quality of *sampajañña*, or alertness. But alertness just notices what's happening. When things are there, it knows they're there. When they're not there, it knows that they're not there. This can serve as a basis for discernment, but it's not discernment in and of itself.

Ajaan Lee was right, I think, in identifying ardency as the discernment element in mindfulness practice. Ardency is defined in the texts as the feeling you have when you realize that there are unskillful mental states in your mind and they're dangerous; that if you don't get rid of them there's going to be danger. If you don't give rise to skillful states, there's going to be danger. This quality is very closely related to heedfulness. And the Pali term for ardency, *atappa*, is very closely related to *ottappa*, which is the fear of evil, a sense of compunction, a sense of conscience: the realization that you can't be lazy or apathetic, just watching things arise and pass away.

With ardency and compunction, you know that you're causing stress with your actions and that the wise reaction, of course, is to try to stop the kinds of actions that would cause stress and suffering. This is why it's wise. And it corresponds to something I've felt for a long time. You sometimes see scholars of Buddhism who give the impression that they know better than everybody else. Those poor stupid people who are practicing aren't as wise as the scholars: That's what the scholars think, but the scholars just sit there and read the books and talk about what they've read. The wise people are the ones who realize they've got unskillful qualities in their minds, that those qualities are causing suffering, and that they've got to do something about it. The best use of the Dhamma is not to talk about it, but to use it to get rid of that suffering.

It's in figuring out what you've got to do to act more skillfully: That's where the wisdom lies. That's where the discernment lies.

So you need to develop a sense of how important your actions are. Wisdom is something that has to lead to action. There is wisdom in the action, or you could say that the practice here is wisdom in action: the willingness to look at the events coming up in the mind and to step back from them just enough to notice, "Where do these things lead? Are they skillful, or are they unskillful?" That's where wisdom can begin.

Ardency, of course, is very closely related to the factor that comes before right mindfulness, which is right effort. Right effort builds on right view in the sense that it makes the distinctions between skillful actions and unskillful actions, skillful qualities of mind and unskillful qualities of mind, and then it tries to do something about them.

You have the duties of the four noble truths. You try to comprehend stress, abandon the cause, realize the cessation of stress, and develop the path to the cessation of stress. The various duties of right effort, which are closely related to ardency, follow from that—such as the abandoning of the second noble truth. That comes under trying to prevent unskillful qualities from arising and to abandon the ones that have arisen. Then there's the developing of the path, the fourth noble truth, which corresponds to trying to give rise to skillful qualities that haven't yet arisen and then to develop them further when they have arisen. As you try to bring that development to its culmination, you have to comprehend the first noble truth so that finally you can realize the third.

All of this has to be driven by desire. The element of discernment relates very closely to desire. What kinds of things do you really desire in life? How do you want your life to play out? What you desire in life is very important—and the realization that it's important is an essential part of wisdom.

All too often we hear that we shouldn't desire anything, that we should learn how to just stop wanting. But for what purpose does not-wanting serve? There's a desire hidden in there. As Ajaan Maha Boowa points out, the only people who have no wants at all are those

who are dead. Even arahants have preferences. They would prefer to see people reach the end of suffering just like themselves. They would prefer to see people not harm one another. Of course their happiness doesn't depend on it. That's why they're free. But the fact that they're free doesn't mean that they lack compassion or discernment or powers of judgment.

What this means, of course, is that we have to look at our lives in the light of the four noble truths along with their duties, and realize there's work to be done.

A common recommendation among the forest ajaans is that you think about the time when you're going to die and ask yourself what kind of life you would like to look back on. If you looked back on your life and realized, "I wasted all that time. Time that I could have devoted to being on the path was just thrown away. Instead of abandoning the causes of stress, I was developing them, and instead of developing the path I was abandoning it"—There'd be a lot of regret if that was the kind of life you had to look back on.

The kind of life you want to look back on is the one that, whether or not you had come to the end of suffering and stress, you could say, "At least I put in my best effort. I tried with all my ingenuity, all my discernment, all my energy. My time wasn't wasted."

Wisdom begins with the reflection on death: the fact that your life is going to end, that many things will just disappear with the end of life, but some things will not disappear. There will be a continuity, and you want to make sure that the continuity will be good. To make sure of that, you want to make sure that your continuity is good right now.

What are you doing? As the Buddha has you ask yourself: "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past, fly past?" What sort of person are you becoming? Are you becoming an ardent person? Or are you becoming a lazy, complacent person?

The wisdom lies in the ardency, the realization that there are dangers out there and in here. As I said, this is related to heedfulness and the realization that you can also do something about it. Then you try to figure out how you can do it, because there are members in the committee who say, "Well, I'd much rather relax right now, or take things easy, or I need my rewards of pleasure. I can practice tomorrow." How are you going to deal with them? That, too, is an element of wisdom. Knowing that there are things that you like to do, but they're going to cause harm down the line: The wisdom lies in knowing how to talk yourself out of them. There are things you don't like to do but are going to give rise to good results down the line: How do you talk yourself into doing them? That, the Buddha said is a measure of your discernment.

So the discernment is all in the action. It's not in reading the books, or observing other people, or in coming up with alternative ways to spend your time.

You hear about more and more people getting involved in what they call engaged Buddhism. They're looking down on people who meditate, saying that meditators are selfish. Well, that's not the Dhamma speaking. That's people's defilements speaking. The best thing you can do for the world is to learn how to engage with your defilements in a way that puts an end to them. That's where your Buddhism should be engaged. Because otherwise your defilements just keep burning you, and through you they burn other people. There's wisdom in realizing that, and wisdom in following through with that realization: realizing you've really got to do something about your mind. The ardency with which you set out on that task is the measure of how wise and discerning you're becoming.