

# *The Wisdom of Tenacity*

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We come to the practice because we're looking for some wisdom in our lives. We've heard that by meditating, the mind gets to calm down; when it's calm and still it can see things more clearly. But then the question arises, what kind of wisdom are we looking for? And it's important to understand right off the bat that wisdom is not a matter of being smart or stupid. Rather, it comes from conviction in the importance of your actions. It's as simple as that. Just learning how to apply that principle across the board turns conviction into wisdom.

Normally we sometimes believe in the importance of our actions and sometimes don't. We dither around. Sometimes we don't like to think that our actions are going to yield results because we know that our actions have been unskillful. Then there are other times when we hope very sincerely that they *will* yield results because we went to the effort to do something good. And so we dither back and forth this way. As a result, wisdom doesn't arise.

Einstein once noted that if you look at the history of science, a lot of major discoveries came from young scientists, but then the same scientists tended to peter out as they got older. As he understood it, it wasn't because they got more stupid as they got older. It was simply that, as a young scientist, you're not afraid to hang on to some line of questioning to see how far it goes. You have tenacity. Whereas older scientists see lots of potential lines of inquiry and can never really settle on one or the other. Part of the problem, of course, is their sense of their impending death. They're afraid that if they latch on to something wrong, then they will have wasted their later years. Of course, if they don't latch on to anything at all, they're sure to waste their later years. But the younger scientists aren't afraid to latch on to something just to see how far it goes.

That's how the qualities of conviction and tenacity make all the difference. There's a story in the Pali tradition of two brothers, Mahapandaka and Culapandaka. The Canon doesn't tell much about them aside from the fact that they were brothers and eventually both became arahants. But in the commentary, you learn that Mahapandaka was very intelligent and Culapandaka very dumb, so dumb that he embarrassed his older brother. Still, Culapandaka eventually became an arahant. The stories vary as to how, but in each case it's a matter of Culapandaka's finally settling down with one meditation topic and really carrying through with it. It was through his tenacity that he finally figured things out.

So as you approach this question of how to give rise to wisdom in your life, you can compare the very basic wisdom teachings with the more refined ones, and you find that they're pretty much all of a piece. One of the Buddha's basic definitions of wisdom is knowing which tasks are really your business and which ones aren't, and then focusing on the ones that are your business and avoiding the ones that aren't. It sounds simple and basic, and it is. But if you really carry through with it, the implications can take you far.

What are your tasks? Well, if you want to find true happiness, one of the tasks is to develop the path. That's what we're trying to do right here: to give rise to a

state of concentration. The mind could be giving rise to all kinds of other states right now, but you've got to choose. These are the states that are really worth getting the mind into. They may seem fabricated and constructed, and sometimes you wonder how something constructed like this could be worthwhile. But the mind is used to constructing things, and as long as it has this habit you might as well construct things that help take you further.

That's part of the genius of the path. You could be sitting here creating all kinds of narratives in your mind, all kinds of theories about yourself and the world around you, but where do those theories lead? If you have the idea of yourself as a bundle of needs that have to be met, that are going to pull you away from the path, you have to learn how to question those needs. Are they really needs, or are they just ideas that you stitch together out of impulses?

This is a lot of what addiction is about. You have an impulse here and an impulse there, and the mind starts stitching them together, saying, "Oh, there's a message here from my body that I really need X," even though it may be something really unskillful, really unhealthy. But it tends to take on a life of its own so that every time the impulse arises, you say, "Oh, that's a sign that there's this big massive need." In cases like that, you want to undo the theory behind that interpretation, undo the narrative, learn how to cut it up into little bits and pieces. In other words, each time an impulse comes, see it just as an impulse and watch it in and of itself.

This is where one of the more abstract wisdom teachings comes in. As the Buddha says, the strength of discernment is knowledge of arising and passing away—which we tend to equate with one of the more advanced stages of practice, but it doesn't have to be. You see an impulse arise, you see an impulse pass away, that's it. And whether there's a need lurking behind it or not, don't ask. Just watch it as an event in the present moment, and you can begin to deconstruct your belief in that massive need. You're following the task of abandoning the cause of suffering—in other words, your tendency to create enemies in your mind, ideas, urges, narratives, that really go against your own best interests—so to stitch those needs together is not your duty right now. It's not one of your tasks. Learn to deconstruct it, to let it go.

As for what *is* your task, you learn to stitch together moments of concentration. To begin with, they may seem like momentary blips on the screen. The mind settles down for a bit and, oops, there it's gone, off someplace else. It all seems so hopeless and inconsequential. But you want to learn how to appreciate those little blips of stillness. They're small and unassuming to begin with, like house elves, but without them the mind would go crazy. Many people come to meditation wondering, "When is the mind going to settle down? I don't see any concentration at all." The problem is that it does settle down in little bits and pieces, but then we trash those little bits and pieces of concentration, those little bits and pieces of stillness. They don't seem impressive. They don't seem like anything we could rely on, so we throw them away.

This is where conviction comes in. It's not a matter of being smart or dumb, simply a matter of holding onto the conviction that these are skillful mind states. And the task is set out: If you want to find a way to true happiness, you learn how to stitch these things together. So you focus on arising and passing away, but with a specific purpose. When those moments of stillness come, you want to

understand why. What did you do? When they go away, you want to understand: What did you do? You're not just watching them arising and passing away, and leaving it at that; you also have an agenda. Once you begin to notice skillful patterns of mind, you want to stitch them together. What can you do to give rise to these moments of stillness again and again and again? What can you do to keep them going once they are there?

Ajaan Lee once commented that there are three stages in the meditation. One is learning how to do it. The second is learning how to maintain it. And the third is learning how to put it to use. The doing is not all that hard. You focus on the breath, and there you are. The maintaining is what's hard. You go shooting past the breath off in the other direction to something else. Then you come shooting past it again. It's like a little kid running into the house, grabbing a sandwich, and running back out again, and then finding that he's dropped the sandwich as he's running along.

What you need to do is learn how to get a sense of balance there when you're with that moment of stillness. And this will take time. In the beginning, you put a lot of energy into it. You wonder how on earth can you ever maintain it. But as the stillness grows, it begins to give energy back to you. It becomes a positive feedback loop in both senses of the term. In other words, the more you do it, the more energy you have. The more energy you have, the more you can do it. And it's a good, positive thing.

So when you're thinking about developing wisdom in your practice, don't overlook the basics: simple things like the Buddha's comment that the difference between a wise person and a fool is that the wise person sees the need to train his or her mind. What makes a person foolish is not seeing that need. You've got lots of smart people out there in the world who don't see that need. Their training of the mind is simply teaching it how to think in different ways and to memorize different things. When the Buddha's talking about training the mind, he's talking about developing good qualities—qualities like honesty, persistence, tenacity, conviction—which are not a matter of being smart or stupid, but simply a matter of wanting sincerely to find long-term happiness.

That's another one of his basic definitions of wisdom: It begins with the question, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" It's a wise question because you realize that long-term happiness is a lot better than the quick fix, and that it's going to depend on your actions.

So the basic wisdom teachings are often the wisest. If you start getting off in too advanced theory, it's very easy to get lost and not even know you're lost, because you think you know more than you do. In fact, one of the most basic wisdom teachings is this: knowing that your own foolishness *is* foolishness. The fool is the person who doesn't recognize his foolishness, who feels that only the subtle, abstract teachings are good enough for him. If you remember that wisdom begins with your willingness to recognize your foolishness, that teaching will carry you far.

Ajaan Lee once made the comment that we tend to confuse things. We think the teachings that seem basic and simple aren't deep. We think the deep teachings are the ones that are abstract and obscure. But a lot of times, those abstract and obscure teachings are just words; the fact you can say them doesn't mean anything at all. The deep teachings are the ones that give us advice that's

useful all the time, right here right now. Because what use is wisdom if it can't lead to long-term happiness, if it can't stop you from causing yourself to suffer?

Ajaan Lee's uses the analogy of a person who wants to find gold. He knows there's gold in the rock in the mountain. The person who thinks he's smart tends to think, "Well, all I have to do is just go out there, take a little pick, and get the gold out. I don't want the rock, I want just the gold. I'd be stupid to take the rock." But you can't get the gold out of the rock with a pick. In other words, you can't gain the Dhamma by figuring things out too much in advance. The person who's going to succeed is the one who's convinced that there's gold here, but it may take time and it may take work. But he's willing to put in the effort. He's willing to use his tenacity. You take the rock, you carry it home, and you throw it in the fire. Eventually the fire reaches the melting point of the gold, and the gold comes out on its own without your having to pry it loose from the rock.

In other words, you hold to a few basic principles and apply them across the board—in particular, this principle of knowing what's your task and what's not. If you know what your task is, you just stick with it. As for all the other work you could be doing, you can let it go. You don't have to waste your time.

So as you sit here stilling the mind, it's like taking the rock and subjecting it to heat. Just sit here and watch as precisely as you can what's going on. If there are unskillful mental states that threaten to stitch themselves together, you learn how to cut, cut, cut all the connections. As for the skillful ones, you learn how to sew them together. That much right there is going to solve a lot of the problems of the mind.