

## *Wisdom for Dummies Revisited*

*February 4, 2017*

We like to think of Buddhist wisdom as something subtle and abstract. And there are aspects of the Buddha's teachings that *are* subtle and abstract. But wisdom has to start with some very basic things, too. You might call it "Wisdom for Dummies." And that means you: You're not going to get to the higher levels until you've mastered the basics.

There are two ways in which the Buddha talks about very basic levels of wisdom. One is if there's something that you like to do but is going to give bad results, you know how to talk yourself out of it. The other is that if there's something that you don't like to do but is going to give good results, you're able to talk yourself into it. In other words, you learn how to psych yourself out. You learn to look at the long term rather than the short term. And you try to figure out what the problem is with your attitude, how you can get around your laziness.

We were talking this afternoon about laziness, about getting up in the morning. There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the different excuses people give for laziness: "I didn't get enough sleep last night," "I'm tired," "I worked yesterday," "I'm going to be working tomorrow," "I came back from a trip yesterday," "I'm going on a trip tomorrow," "I've been sick." And then he compares those with the reasons that another person might give for being more energetic in the practice. And it turns out they're the same reasons: "I worked a lot yesterday but now I've got a chance to meditate today," "I'm going to be working tomorrow but I've got this chance to meditate now," "I've been sick – Well, finally I've gotten over that, so I can meditate some. I may still be weak, but the illness could come back. So here's my chance."

In other words, there's no difference in the objective situation. The difference is in your attitude. So if the voices to get you more energetic are not there in your mind, try to learn some of them. Because you're not the only one who likes to sleep in late – everybody likes to sleep in late. Ajaan Maha Boowa complained about how he was a lazy person. And here he was: someone who eventually could sit five or six hours as if it were nothing. We all have to figure out some way to get around our laziness.

At the same time, there are things we like to do that we have to learn how to say No to. Learn how to see their drawbacks. At the very least, put up a fight. All too often, the voices in the mind say, "You're going to be giving in anyhow in five minutes, so why don't you give in now, so we don't have to waste a lot of time and energy." You can respond and say, "Well, I don't know about five minutes from now, but right now I'm responsible for right now. So if it's something that I should do, I'm going to do it now. If it's something I shouldn't do, I won't be doing it now. We'll talk about five minutes in five minutes' time."

Another one of the reasons they'll give is, "You'll get up and meditate, but you're not going to last very long, so why bother?" So you say, "At least I get up, get into position, and then we'll

talk from there.” It’s not like you’re committed, that once you get up you have to meditate. But you say, “Well, at least give it a try.” The same when you find yourself doing something you shouldn’t be doing. You’ve started doing it and part of the mind will say, “Well, now that you’ve started, you’re committed and you might as well go all the way.” You say, “No. I can stop.”

So learn how to psych yourself out. It’s all very simple. But the problem is that you tend to identify with certain voices in the mind, and they make it complex. You’ve got to learn how to pull away your sense of identification with them and learn to see those voices as not-self.

Again, we like to think of the not-self teaching as something very abstract and subtle. But it’s something we’re doing all the time—we’re not-selfing all the time in order to self new things. You self with an idea and then another idea comes up, so you not-self the first idea and then self the second idea. Learn to be a little more systematic about how you do that. Learn to view your sense of self and the activity of not-selfing as tools. Then ask yourself, “When is it useful to identify with this idea? And when is it useful to identify with that idea?” You have the freedom to choose. Selfing is a verb, it’s an activity, a kind of karma. And as with all kinds of karma, the question is, “When is it skillful? When is it not skillful?”

So give yourself a little more freedom around this issue. The idea that you’re committed to being a certain way or a certain sort of person: That gets in the way of the practice. If everybody were committed to being the way they already were, the Buddha wouldn’t have bothered teaching. It wouldn’t have served any purpose at all. But he saw that we *can* train ourselves: Part of the mind can train the rest of the mind. It’s simply a matter of getting the good part of the mind, the part that really does wish your true well-being, to have more power.

This is one of the reasons why, when we meditate, we work with the breath to give it a sense of well-being. The good part of the mind needs help. And working with the breath gives the rest of the mind a sense of well-being as well, gives the whole body a sense of well-being—so that the next time you think about meditating, you’ll have a good association with it. You’ll remember that once you make the effort of settling in, it feels really, really good. That becomes your incentive to get up early the next morning and to try it again.

The other basic role of wisdom is that when things go wrong, when things don’t go well in life, you learn to give yourself pep talks. This can apply to the meditation: Everyone is going to have barren stretches in the meditation. It’s common. There are times, at the beginning, when things are opening up inside, all kinds of new interesting things are happening, but then it levels out and you’re stuck with the same-old same-old, over and over again. Well, learn how to see that maybe something else is going on in that “same-old” mind that you’re not seeing right now. Sometimes the mind makes some progress and then it has to fill in. It makes a quick sketch and then it has to fill in the rest of the sketch, and it’s going to take time.

I had a Thai friend who was an artist. Sometimes he would do large traditional Thai paintings. He was working once on a large painting of Rama, and his wife came into the studio

one afternoon after he'd been working for hours on little tiny details. She looked at the painting and said, "Oh, you didn't get much done today did you?" He said, "I've been working all day."

There are parts of the mind that have to fill in the details before you're going to be able to move on. So learn how to keep yourself in a good mood in the mean time. Maybe the results aren't coming as quickly as possible or the changes aren't coming as quickly as you'd like, but just keep with it, keep with it, keep with it.

Think of the Shackleton expedition. They lost their ship down near Antarctica. Help was hundreds and hundreds of miles away. And their situation was pretty bleak. But the captain gave them good pep talks and he looked after everybody. He made sure that everybody did what they could—and what they should. They'd all learned, "This is what you have to do in a situation like this," and so he made sure everybody did just that. He said, "At the very least, if we die, we'll know we're not dying from our carelessness or our own laziness. If we die doing our duty, that's an honorable death." And they all made their way out.

So as you're meditating, you're not going to die from the meditating, but at the very least say, "I'm going to do it well. I'm going to stick with the steps. I don't want to fail in meditation because of carelessness." And oftentimes, when progress is not happening, it's because you're getting sloppy in the details. So go back and think about step one, step two, step three. And don't think that it's embarrassing to go back to step one, two, or three.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a path over which you walk back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, many times. He says, one, the path gets worth smooth, and two, you see little details you wouldn't have noticed if you just walked through it once. A lot of this has to do with the fact that the mind is a complex thing and sometimes you have to go over the same things again and again and again to see all the implications.

So that's another aspect of basic wisdom or wisdom for dummies. Of course, this kind of wisdom is not going to keep you dumb. In fact, it's the kind of wisdom that gets you out of being a dummy. The dummies are the ones who want to learn about emptiness and dependent co-arising all at once without having any foundation. All they get are perceptions, labels in the mind. They don't actually see where these teachings are useful and why they're useful tools. The Buddha didn't teach these things just to show off how smart he was. Everything he taught was for a purpose. And when your mind is ready, then you see, "Oh, this serves that purpose."

Ajaan Lee talks about people who want to get gold out of rock. They see somebody taking a big pick-axe and carrying big loads of rock back to the smelter, and they say to themselves, "That's dumb. Who wants all that rock? All you want is the gold." So they go and take a little tiny toothpick to get just the gold right out of the rock. But it doesn't work that way. You have to take the rock and put it in the smelter and subject it to heat, and then the metals will come melting out of their own accord.

So there's a lot in the meditation that you can't anticipate. You can't plan too far ahead. But you know: These are the steps. We're lucky that we have them laid out for us. Ajaan Lee's seven steps in his "Method 2": If there's something going wrong in your meditation, look and see which of the steps you're not getting right or which ones you're getting sloppy about. Then you just keep doing them again and again and again. And give yourself pep talks.

It's like any manual skill that involves a lot of repetitive actions—like sharpening a knife on a whetstone: When you're sharpening a knife, you have to be alert. And you have to be very sensitive to make sure that you're not ruining the blade by making some parts too sharp or wearing down some parts too much and others not enough. The edge of the blade has to be very even and smooth. So you have to give yourself pep talks as you're sitting there, rubbing the blade over the stone, over the stone, over the stone. again and again and again. If you keep your spirits up, you find that you can make your way through and do the job well.

This may be one of the reasons why the ajaans of old and the Zen masters would have you learn a manual skill before you meditated, because the qualities of mind that go into mastering a skill are precisely the qualities of mind you need to meditate.

But they're basic not because they're dumb. They're basic because they're important. They're essential to everything else. One: the teaching on learning how to put long-term ahead of short-term. And two: the teaching on how to not let things get you down when the long-term seems long. Every other aspect of wisdom comes out of these two principles. They're the habits that will help see you all the way through.