

Smart vs. Wise

June 19, 2012

Years back I was reading a Miss Manners column. A woman had written in, saying that she had a son in kindergarten and it was in a very upscale school. As Christmas time came, she and the son went out and bought a present for the son's teacher. They came back and cut out some construction paper and she helped her son make a little card, in his own dear hand, to go along with the present.

Then the day came when all the kids took their presents to the teacher, and that afternoon the son came back in tears. All the other little kindergarten kids had personalized engraved cards with their presents. Her son was really upset because all he had was his little handmade card.

So the woman asked Miss Manners for advice. And Miss Manners' comment was, "Your son is traveling in a bad crowd. If kindergarten kids already have engraved cards, something's wrong."

It's not just the educational system. Our society as a whole has really strange values.

I was reading recently that people working on Wall Street think they're the smartest people in the world. And the hedge fund people think that the peons on Wall Street are just that—just slaves, wage slaves—while they're the smartest ones on Earth.

It's a very warped idea of what it means to be intelligent. It's all very shortsighted: thinking that intelligence is a sign of putting in as little work as possible and squeezing the most out of other people that you can. It may be smart in the short term, but it's really dumb in the long term.

As the Buddha said, you've got to take the long view if you want to be wise, if you want to be truly happy.

The beginning of wisdom, he said, is, one, you go to a contemplative—someone who's found the end of suffering, who knows something about the deathless; in other words, you go to the right people—and then two, you ask them, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What is blameless? What is skillful?" And then on the other side, "What, when I do it, will be to my long-term harm and suffering? What is blameworthy? What is unskillful?"

These are the questions you ask, but to get good answers you have to choose the right people, people who do take the long view, the really long view. But notice those questions: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" There's an "I," there's a "my" in there.

Sometimes we think the Buddha taught that there is no self. But he classed

the idea that there is no self as form of wrong view, just as he classed the idea that there *is* a self as a form of wrong view.

He did note, however, that we have a process called “I-making and my-making,” where we keep creating a sense of self. And if you read the texts, that’s one of the things that the arahant goes beyond.

A lot of us would like to take the cheaters’ route, “Well, I’ll just clone that idea by saying there is no self and I’ll live with that assumption.” But you can’t do that. In that case, the I-making and the my-making go underground where you can’t find them.

So you bring them up to the surface. The “I” in the Buddha’s question is the agent or the producer. The “my” there in “my long-term welfare and happiness” is the person who’s going to be receiving the results of these actions.

Now, some actions give immediate results and they’re very easy to judge. You spit in the wind and it comes right back at you, so you learn not to spit in the wind. You stick your hand into a fire and it burns immediately.

But there are also things that are pleasant to do now that are going to lead to long-term suffering; and things that are unpleasant to do that are going to lead to long-term welfare and happiness. You’ve got to learn how to deal skillfully with those situations, and you need a good strong healthy sense of self in order to do that.

You see this in modern psychology, where they talk about anticipation and sublimation. Anticipation means you see that there’s harm down the line that you’ve got to prepare for. And it really does matter that harm is going to come down the line. If you didn’t care about what happened to you five days from now or five years from now, there’d be no reason to do anything skillful right now. You could just do whatever you enjoy right now and that would be it. But causality doesn’t let you get off the hook that way. If you don’t treat it well, it’ll bite.

This is why you need to develop sublimation, realizing that there are certain pleasures that you have to forgo right now for the sake of a larger pleasure down the line, so you have to replace them with more harmless forms of pleasure. Otherwise, the mind will go sneaking off to find a hit of pleasure wherever it can. So sublimation is what helps anticipation to work.

These are aspects of a healthy sense of self. And the Buddha advises that we develop and maintain these attitudes.

Again, you hear that when you hit the end of the path there’s no sense of I or mine, no sense of conceit, everything is all put aside. Well, both self and not-self are put aside at that point. That’s because there’s no need for any of these concepts anymore. In the meantime, though, you do need them.

Anticipation the Buddha calls heedfulness: realizing that if you don’t get your act together now, there’s going to be trouble down the line. He augments

that with a sense of shame, a healthy sense of shame.

I remember talking to a psychologist a while back who was surprised that there could be such a thing as a healthy sense of shame. That's scary. Psychologists spend their time putting their opinions into people's ears and heads. And if they think that shame is always unhealthy, then we have a shameless society.

You have to realize that your actions do have consequences and that you do have a choice as to how to act. This teaching is so important that it's one of the few issues where the Buddha would go out and actually argue with other people. When he heard that someone was teaching either that your actions have no impact at all, that there's no sense of causality leading from one moment to the next, or that you don't have any choices—in other words, the doctrine of determinism—he'd actually go and argue with people who taught these things and point out that the idea of doing anything at all, teaching anything at all, taking on a practice of any kind at all, would make no sense with either of those ideas, because they close off the path.

There is freedom of choice and your actions do have consequences: You have to accept these principles as working hypotheses. So you try to develop a healthy sense of I who's making the choices and the healthy sense of I who's going to be receiving the results.

Ven. Ananda talks about the healthy sense of the producer or the agent. He says we practice to overcome conceit, but there's a need for conceit on the path—the conceit that says this: "Other people can gain awakening, they're human beings, I'm a human being, why can't I gain awakening too?" That's an attitude you want to develop.

And the Buddha talks about the healthy sense of self as the receiver or consumer of the results of your actions. He says that when you're feeling tempted to wander off the path, you have to ask yourself, "Do I really want to go back to where I was before? Would I really be caring for myself? What kind of happiness would I be creating for myself?" It'd be pretty miserable.

So one of the signs of wisdom certainly is not how you can take advantage of other people or how you can squeeze the most money out of the system. That's very short-sighted. Wisdom is learning how to take the long view and find ways of encouraging yourself to stick with things, to stick with the path even when it gets difficult, so that the long-term results are solid and good.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how the path to the supreme happiness is going to involve some suffering. After all, your defilements don't want you to be on the path. And it's important that you learn how not to identify with them.

It's so easy when greed or laziness whisper in your ears, it's so easy when anger whispers in the ears, whispers in your heart, for you to identify with the

voice and say, “Ah, Yes. This is what I really feel, what I really believe.” But where do those attitudes take you? Where has greed gotten the world? Where has anger gotten the world? Why do we like these things so much? Why do we identify with them? They give a cheap satisfaction in the immediate moment, but that’s it. There’s a lot of long-term suffering that they bring in their wake.

So the practice requires the ability to look down the long corridors of time, to take the long view, realizing that there will be things that are difficult to do but are going to bring happiness. And you’ve got to learn how to use your ingenuity to be able to talk yourself into doing them. You can’t have the teacher sitting there holding your hand all the time.

The same with things you like to do now but you know are going to lead to suffering down the line: You have to learn how to talk yourself out of them, not to kill off the voices that remind you that they have their consequences.

For all too long, the ingenuity in your mind has been on the side of the defilements. You’ve got to learn how to bring your ingenuity around to the other side, to the side of healthy I-making and my-making.

That’s your only hope for any happiness of real substance.