

The Beginnings of Wisdom

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Wisdom begins with the desire to find long-term happiness. It's important to keep that point in mind, especially when we listen to the teachings on inconstancy or impermanence.

Remember that the desire for long-term happiness provides the framework for understanding how to use the teachings on inconstancy, because a lot of people get it the other way around. They say that wisdom starts with seeing how everything is inconstant. Then, from that point, you look at your desire for happiness and you realize that you've got to tame it, you've got to tone it down: Just accept that things are inconstant; long-term happiness is impossible. So you grab what you can.

Of course, as a good Buddhist, you're polite. You don't grab too much. You hold on to things for just a bit, and then you let them go. Whatever pleasures you can find, you realize they're passing, and you milk them for the pleasure you can find in them and let them go. Then find another one—as if you were dancing and kept changing partners.

But if you think in those terms, there's no reason to put any effort into finding particular forms of happiness. And objectively speaking, no way of finding happiness would be better than any other. You'd simply accept the pleasures as they come, wherever they come from, with the bittersweet realization you have to let them go. But that's okay, because new pleasures will come up in their place.

This is all very wrong-headed, because it's got the framework and the teaching that fits into the framework all backwards.

This is similar to that issue of which teaching is the framework: the four noble truths on the one hand, or the three characteristics or perceptions on the other. The two issues are actually related. The four noble truths tell us that the end of suffering is possible. Long-term happiness is possible. We cultivate the desire for that long-term happiness as we practice the path. We let go of any desires that get in the way, that would lead to suffering, and in letting go of those desires we have to use the three perceptions to develop a sense of dispassion. So the three perceptions find their role within the context of the four noble truths.

In the same way, the perception of inconstancy finds its role within the context of our desire for long-term happiness. That desire is something the Buddha takes for granted. He says we all start with suffering. When we suffer, we search for somebody who knows s way out. That search for a way out becomes

wise when we look for someone who's practiced—as the Buddha says, a contemplative or a brahman, by which he means a noble disciple or at the very least somebody who knows the Dhamma—and we ask that person, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?”

This is the point where your search for an escape from suffering becomes wise, because you recognize that it's going to depend on your actions and that there is such a thing as long-term happiness. That's the message we learn from the four noble truths. And of course, long-term is better than short-term. So in that context, with any happiness that's inconstant, you have to ask yourself, “Does this measure up?”

Now, there are some inconstant pleasures that will measure up for the time being: the pleasures of generosity, the pleasures of virtue, and the pleasures of meditation. Even though these may not be permanent—they have their ups and downs—still, they're more long-term than your typical pleasures because they're totally blameless. And as you look for happiness in these ways, you get a sense of self-esteem. You realize that you're being responsible in your search for happiness, and you see that being good in these ways makes other people happy, too. In that sense of connection, your happiness and their happiness are not in conflict. It warms the heart. It overcomes your sense of being totally alone in this world. And as I said, it gives rise to a sense of self-esteem.

This is why, when the Buddha identified the beginning of wisdom, it wasn't with the question: “Is form constant or inconstant?” That comes later. It begins with, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” As for the inconstancy of form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness: That's a teaching you use within the context of that search for long-term happiness.

As you get in the more advanced stages of the practice, you look at the states of concentration that you can develop. Sometimes you don't realize they're states of concentration. The mind just gets really, really still—very expansive, very bright—and you might ask yourself, “Is this it? Is this what I've been practicing for?” Well, you pull out that question: “Is it constant or inconstant?” You have to watch it. You realize that if it's something you have to put together and you have to maintain, it's not going to last forever. And there's the stress. Even though it may be very slight, there's still the stress in the maintaining.

So you ask yourself, “Is this worth it? Should I claim this as my goal?” Well, no. That inspires you to move on, to look for something better.

So the perception of inconstancy is a tool that you use within the larger context of your search for happiness. It's for testing whatever form of happiness

you arrive at to see if it's the real deal. In the meantime, it encourages you to look for forms of happiness that are relatively long-term.

It's in the context of giving priority to the search for true or lasting happiness that the whole practice of merit makes sense. It's not simply that you happen to be strange and like to be generous and virtuous whereas other people like to find their happiness in other ways, by being selfish and heartless. It's because you realize that the kind of happiness that comes from merit is better, say, than the happiness that comes from simply trying to grab hold of pleasures in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile sensations. It's wiser, less harmful, and more conducive to further progress on the path. So the Buddha's teachings on the search for happiness are not "different strokes for different folks" or just whatever happens to catch your fancy.

You want to think through your search for happiness. Think about the fact that happiness will be long-term only if it doesn't cause harm to other people. That realization is the beginning of compassion. And happiness will depend on your actions: That realization is the beginning of purity. So when you think carefully about happiness, you realize that the wise search for happiness includes compassion and purity. And here you've got all the qualities of the Buddha—his wisdom, his compassion, and his purity. These are the things we admire in him. If we follow his example and search for happiness in a way that's responsible and well thought through, we'll develop those qualities within ourselves. And that augments our happiness.

So it's not just a matter of switching partners whenever a certain pleasure falls away. It's building qualities within yourself that you can rely on in the long term. The Buddha was never the sort of teacher who would say that the search for happiness is bad and that you shouldn't try to look for your own happiness. Quite the contrary, he says to search for happiness, but do it wisely.

Think about the implications of what a wise search for happiness would be. And when you do that, that's when you begin to be genuinely wise.