

The Buddha Defines Wisdom

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There was a king's minister who came to see the Buddha one time and offered his definition of a wise person: someone who was learned, was mindful, who could understand what was being said to him, and was skilled in the affairs of the world. In other words, the minister was describing himself, and was giving a very worldly definition of wisdom. He asked the Buddha, "Do you want to praise my definition, or do you want to criticize it?"

The Buddha said, "Neither." But then he offered another definition: four qualities that make you wise. One is that you work for the welfare of many people. Another is that you can get the mind into jhana whenever you want. The third is that you have control over the ways of the mind. In other words, you think whatever thoughts you want to think, and you don't have to think the thoughts you don't want to think. You can will the resolves you want to will, and you don't will the resolves you don't. Then finally, you've eradicated the effluents. In this case, of course, the Buddha was describing himself.

It's a very high standard for discernment or wisdom, but we can learn some lessons from it whatever level we're on in our own practice. One is that wisdom is practical. In no case does the Buddha talk about wisdom being a body of knowledge in the abstract. It's mainly a matter of skills, plus a set of values: that you want to make sure that your actions are not only for your own welfare, but also for the welfare of as many people as you can think. This is wise, of course, in the sense that if you're acting for the welfare of other people, they're not going to try to destroy your happiness. You've got some goodness inside, and you're happy to share it. That makes your own happiness safer.

As for the ability to control the ways of the mind and to get the mind into jhana, those both come from two very simple principles. One is the realization that the mind needs to be trained. You can't just sit there and watch it coming and going, thinking this, thinking that, and then thinking that wisdom lies in \ allowing the mind to do whatever it's going to do and not get upset about it. We're here to train the mind, which means that every time you're able to say No to an unskillful urge or an unskillful thought, and make the No stick, you're doing something wise. But of course you want to be able to develop that as a skill, because if you simply stomp down with a No, then you simply drive the urge or the thought underground in a way where it's going to come back out again. That's not yet wise.

To really control your mind, you want to be able to say No in a way that's really effective. And that's what requires wisdom. You can't use just force or just restraint. The wisdom lies in getting the obstreperous voices of the mind on your side by pointing out to them that we all want happiness. Every member of the committee of the mind wants happiness, simply that we have different ideas about what it means, what it would be, how to go about it. But if you can show the impatient members of the committee that there's a well-being that can come right here in the present moment by being on the path, they're more likely to want to listen and to get on board. This is why the control of the mind—in other words, thinking what thoughts you want to think, and not thinking what you don't want to think—has to go together with the ability to get the mind into a state where it does feel a sense of rapture and well-being.

So you provide the mind with an alternative pleasure. The Buddha himself said as much. Jhana is wise in practice in the sense that you may know in the abstract the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, the drawbacks of sensuality, but if you don't have an alternative pleasure, you're going to go back to your old sensual thoughts. So you cut off your sensual thoughts with the contemplation of the body.

Go through the different parts. Ask yourself which part of the body, taken on its own, would you like to lie down with at night? A pile of skin? A couple of intestines? There's really nothing there that's really all that attractive. And yet, when it's put all together and sewn up, made up, and clothed, then it starts getting attractive. What's going on? Where are the perceptions of the mind playing tricks on you? You want to come from understanding so that you have control over thinking the thoughts you want to think, and don't have to think the thoughts you don't want to think—in other words, thinking thoughts that are going to be for your long-term welfare and happiness, willing things that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.

The wisdom lies, as I said, in psyching out the mind, getting it on your side, so that you're not constantly battling over these things. And the fact that all the committee members want happiness gives you your opening into them, to show them that this is a much better happiness. Get the mind to settle down. Breathe in a way that feels good inside. Spread that sense of good breath around. This way, you can provide the mind with an immediate pleasure so that the impatient members are happy to settle in. As for the members that want entertainment, you can play with the breath in lots of ways, or you can entertain yourself with body contemplation. As I said, think of various ways in which you can drive home the point that the parts of the body are really not all that attractive. Use your ingenuity.

This is why the control of the mind is wise, both in the sense that it requires wisdom to do it, strategic wisdom, and in the sense that it protects you from doing all kinds of unskillful things.

And then finally, the knowledge that puts an end to defilements: That basically is the four noble truths.

You remember that the four truths are not simply four interesting facts about suffering. They're sorting boxes, categories. Something comes up in the mind, and you can ask yourself, "Is this stress, or is this the cause of stress?" In other words, is this clinging, or is it craving? They can sometimes be very similar. But the duty for each is different. If it's craving, you abandon it. If it's clinging, you've got to comprehend it. The best first step is to assume that it's clinging.

Try to comprehend what's going on. Then you get so that when you really understand, you can say, "Oh. These acts of mind are clinging, and these ones are craving." You know what to abandon. It's like coming into your house and finding the house flooded with water. If you just try to bail out the water, you're never going to come to the end of it. But if you find where the broken pipe is, then you seal off the broken pipe, and that's the end of the problem. But to get to the pipe, you have to wade through some water. So you're going to be wading through a lot of stuff, a lot of suffering before you find the cause. This is why we need to have concentration. This is another reason why concentration is a wise thing to be doing. It gives you a foundation so that you're not feeling threatened by whatever stress or suffering there is in the mind.

You find that at least one part of the mind is not stressed out. It's not suffering, so you focus your attention there. Take that as your foundation. And then from that foundation, you can watch the suffering, watch the stress, watch the clinging. You can begin to sort out where's the clinging and where's the craving. You've found the pipe. Now you can seal it off.

That's what the Buddha tells us the four noble truths do. They're categories for assigning duties, so learn to use them in that way. And even if you don't get all the way to the ending of the effluents, at least you've got the mind in the right problem-solving mode. Because that's what the four noble truths are. You've got the problem of suffering, and you know that where there's a problem, there's got to be a cause. If you're going to solve the problem, you've got to solve it at the cause. You don't solve it at the result. Then you do what needs to be done to solve it at the cause. That embodies the four noble truths right there.

So wisdom is a matter of solving problems. The king's minister who came to the Buddha was thinking mainly in terms of problems of the world. The Buddha was thinking more of problems inside the mind.

You work for the benefit of the world. This doesn't mean you ignore your own benefit. As he said, the most praiseworthy people are the ones who work for their own benefit and for the benefit of others. Second down are those who work for their own benefit, even if it's not for the benefit of others. Third down: those who work for the benefit of others, but not for themselves. An interesting ranking. As the Buddha said, your primary responsibility is to yourself. But you move beyond that, and it opens up the mind.

There are times when you're sitting here meditating, and you're wondering, "Here I am, just taking care of my little self when all these big problems are out there in the world." But then you remember: What does the world need most? It needs people who've got their minds trained. When you've got your mind trained, then you've got more to offer others. And you offer it in a way that's impressive, because you're not just offering them words or ideas. You're trying to embody what you're teaching in the sense that you're doing this not just for yourself. It's uplifting.

So in all these cases, wisdom is strategic. It's not simply a series of little statements. You've seen those books of wisdom: the wisdom of Lao Tzu, the wisdom of whoever, just page after page of wise statements. But that's not what wisdom is. Wisdom lies in seeing a problem and knowing how to solve it, sometimes seeing a problem that nobody else saw, but solving it. The king's minister didn't see the problems that the Buddha saw, which is why his definition of wisdom, even though it would work for the world, was not nearly as penetrating as the Buddha's. The Buddha saw that the big problems are inside, so you've got to solve them inside. The first step is realizing that you've got to train the mind. The second step is realizing you're doing this not only for yourself. You work on those two principles, and all the ramifications of wisdom will get worked out, both for your own benefit and for the benefit of those around you.