

## *Return of Wisdom for Dummies*

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When the Buddha introduced his teachings to people, he very rarely started out with big principles like the four noble truths or the three characteristics. He started out instead with *an action* that his listeners were familiar with: He'd start out with the act of generosity.

And he had an etiquette around that. It wasn't to get people to be generous. Often he would give that talk *after* they had given a gift of the meal to the Sangha or given a gift of some other kind. He'd have them reflect on the act of generosity—what it meant.

To begin with, the action did make a difference in their lives, and it was an act where they had some freedom of choice. They could have given or they could have not given, but they made the choice to give. When you think about it, it's one of those areas where you realize early on in life that you *do* have freedom of choice.

And that there are levels of happiness: Some levels are more lasting than others. You get a cake and you eat it, well, that's it. One full stomach and then it's gone. But if you take that cake and give it to somebody else, you can think about how good it feels to have been generous. You see that the second form of happiness is more lasting.

The fact of having a choice means that you're not necessarily compelled by past actions or by anybody else. These two reflections contain an awful lot of the teaching that you do have freedom of choice. It's one of the most basic principles that the Buddha would teach.

Ordinarily, he wasn't the sort of person who would go out and pick fights with other people. Other people would sometimes come and challenge him to a debate, but it was very rare for him to go out and question people or to attack them for their teachings. Yet one of the issues that he *would* attack people on was the question of whether you have freedom of choice in the present moment.

If there were people who taught that everything you experience is based on past actions or on the will of a creator god or were totally random, he'd go and seek those people out. He'd say, "Do you really teach this? Do you realize the implications of what you're saying? If what you say is true, then people kill because of past actions"—it's not a choice in the present moment. Or if it's because of a creator god, again, it's not because of a choice they're making right now. "You're leaving people bewildered," he said, "unprotected."

In other words, you're bewildered if an impulse comes up and you don't really know if you can say Yes, or No to it. To be unprotected means that you're not protected from your urges. But if you realize that you do have choice and there are gradations of happiness that can come from your choice, then you begin to see the need for training the mind so that it can choose things more and more wisely.

There's another realization that you see when you look at your actions, which is that some of your actions are things you like to do but will lead to suffering, and other things that you don't like to do will lead to happiness. That's where you need training: one, training in seeing cause and effect; and two, learning how to psych yourself up to do the right thing. Sometimes it takes a while to develop the skills you need in order to do what really will be for your long-term happiness, and the skills you need to say *No* to your likes and *No* to your dislikes if they get in the way of what leads to your true well-being.

So wisdom, as far as the Buddha is concerned, is very pragmatic. We can talk about emptiness, we can talk about dependent co-arising in the abstract, but that's not wisdom. Wisdom starts when you realize that you need to get your actions under control. And where do your actions come from? They come from your intentions, so you've got to control your intentions.

This is why the Buddha's discussion of generosity would then often lead on to virtue. When you look at your actions outside—the things you do and say—you have to ask yourself, what is your intention?

This is the beginning of his teaching to Rahula. First he emphasized the need for truthfulness: He said if you feel no shame in telling a deliberate lie, then there's no potential for you as a contemplative—in other words, someone who takes true happiness seriously. And of course, telling lies outside makes it easy for you to start telling lies inside. So you want to be truthful inside and out.

Then look at your intentions: What do you truly think is going to happen as a result of what you intend to do? This can be a physical act, a verbal act, or a mental act. If you anticipate harm, don't do it. Act only on the intentions that you think will be harmless.

This is how you're going to learn what really is harmless and what's not. You can have lots of preconceived notions about what a particular act will do, but unless you try it out, you're not going to know.

So, areas where you *know* that it's going to be harmful, you don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead and do it.

While you're doing it, look for the results that are coming up right now. This fits in with the principle that some of the things you do will give results right now—and you look for that—and if you see any harm you stop whatever you're doing. If you don't see any harm, you can continue.

When you're done, you reflect on the long-term results. If it turns out that even though you thought it would be harmless and you didn't see any harm while you were doing it, but it did cause long-term harm, then you make up your mind not to repeat that mistake. You recognize it as a mistake and you go talk it over with someone else who knows more about the path than you do. See what advice you can get.

Notice, the Buddha is not trying to pamper your ego saying, “Well, it doesn’t matter,” or, “You’re still a rock star anyhow.” He wants you to recognize a mistake as a mistake so that you can learn not to repeat it, because that’s the most compassionate thing you can teach somebody about their mistakes: how not to repeat them.

If you didn’t make a mistake—in other words, you didn’t cause any harm—then you take joy in the fact that you’re progressing in the training and then you continue training.

Now, from this basic instruction, you can derive lots of different implications that go further into the teaching. One of them is that you realize you need to train your mind: You have to train your intentions and be very careful to learn how to say No to an intention you know is harmful.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate. We’re learning how to gain some control over our intentions. We make up our mind to do what’s right and then we stick with what’s right. Use the breath as a way of maintaining that intention so that you can associate a sense of comfort and ease and well-being inside as you stick with what you know is skillful.

As you’re meditating, you reflect in the same way: You make up your mind to stick with the breath, and as you’re staying with the breath, you watch: How is it going? If there’s any sense of dis-ease in the breath or instability in the mind, what can you do to adjust it?

You get used to looking at your actions from a truthful and objective standpoint. This is a lot of wisdom right there, because if you can’t look at your actions objectively you’re never going to learn. And if you can’t learn, there’s not much hope.

After all, the Buddha’s teachings are hopeful. Think of it: He talks about the total end of suffering and that it can be done through human effort. So, you have to start with a sense of confidence in the power of your actions and in your ability to reflect on your actions and learn from them.

This is why he said that the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to doing as best you can and you reflect: Where is your best still not good enough? How can you make it better? As he said, if you learn how to reflect on your actions like this and see where they’re causing even the slightest bit of stress, that’s how you make progress. That’s where insight comes in.

We’re told that insight is seeing things in terms of the three characteristics or the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. Those are basically standards for judgement. You don’t have to repeat those words to yourself, just look at what you’re doing, see where you’re creating a sense of well-being, and then ask yourself: Is it good enough?

If there’s any inconstancy in it—you detect that—then it’s obviously not good enough. Now, maybe it’s as good as you can do right now, so you hold on to it until you can find something better. But you’re alert to the fact that this is not the goal. If there’s any stress, if there’s anything in there that you cannot control, it’s obviously not what you want. In other

words, you're basically making a value judgement. Whatever state of well-being you're able to create: Is it good enough?

It may be provisionally good enough because, as I said, it may be the best you can do for the time being. But you always keep reminding yourself that you want to keep looking back at your actions—what you're doing right now—because that's what makes all the difference.

Think about it. When the Buddha taught people how to put an end to suffering, he didn't ask them first, "What kind of bad karma do you have in the past? Only if you have no bad karma can I teach you." That wasn't his approach. His approach was based on the assumption everybody has bad karma, everybody has some good karma. That's how you get into the human realm. The question is: What can you do in the present moment so that you don't have to suffer from the bad karma, and not suffer even from the good karma? That's where his emphasis is. When he's teaching karma, this is where the emphasis is—on what you're doing right now, and on your ability to reflect on it and learn.

This is all very basic. You might even call it *wisdom for dummies*. But it is genuine wisdom, and it's the kind of wisdom that helps you see where you've been foolish, where you've been dumb, but you don't have to keep on being dumb. It's more focused on where your *actions* were dumb, and now you don't have to repeat them.

Ajaan Lee makes this point in one of his analogies. He says some people think they're smart. They learn that there's gold ore in some rock. They don't want the rock, they just want the gold, so they take a little toothpick to get the gold out of the rock, but it doesn't work. Then there are the people who know they're not smart yet and they need to reflect. Those are the ones, he says, who take the rock and submit it to heat—in other words, the heat of trying to develop right effort. As you do what you think is best and then reflect on it, and then do your best again and reflect on it some more, again and again and again—and you're *willing* to do it again and again—the heat of your effort helps to melt the gold out of the rock.

So, wisdom is not a matter of memorizing the Buddha's advanced teachings. It's learning how they relate to something that's really basic: What are you doing? How can you become more skillful in doing it? And how far can you take that question of skillfulness? That's how the results come, and that's how wisdom for dummies really is wise.