



Forest Wisdom

“No one and nothing can free you but your own understanding.” - Ajahn Chah

From various sources, by Ajahn Kalyāno

Wisdom (*paññā*) is something that frees us from suffering and leads to states of happiness beyond what is normally possible in this world. It is, together with mindfulness (*sati*), the way to liberation from all suffering, discontentment and unease. Wisdom resolves problems and sets things right and its highest expression is the culmination of the Buddhist path. Knowing how to recognise and cultivate this quality would seem to be of utmost interest to every earnest practitioner.

The range of wisdom and the wisdom state

Buddhist wisdom (*paññā*) has a very wide range of meaning and includes kinds of understanding starting from study and learning – the initial education of wisdom; on to the understanding that arises from reasoning and pondering. A deeper kind of wisdom, however, is more closely connected with contemplation, a deeply probing and penetrating mental faculty firmly based in a calm and concentrated mind. Wisdom on the deepest levels is no longer verbal, no thinking is there. There is a brightness to the mind that penetrates – knowing and seeing together.

This wisdom, when it arises, is not restless; instead, it carries with it a sense of peace and happiness, and has about it a joyful quality. The mind with wisdom goes deep into a meditative state where it examines the object calmly and clearly without wavering in the least. Seeing profound implications from relatively simple objects or contemplations and subsequently letting go of attachment is the work of wisdom.

Worldly thought and Buddhist wisdom

Paññā differs from wisdom in the worldly sense and does not simply mean intellectual thought, clever or skilful thinking that leads to understanding. It is not superficial discursive thought which jumps from one object to another, and never goes deeply into any of them. *Paññā* is of quite a different order, being something that can reverse long-standing habits and bring about great positive change internally.

Wisdom is very closely connected with insight but we should not mistake the kind of insight that comes from using reason and discursive thought with *paññā*. One may feel that such insights are deep and important, for they may reveal things about life and people we had never realised before. Yet when we review that understanding, it does not really have much effect on our lives overall or might not hold up over time. Its truth is specific not universal. So it is in a sense as uncertain and impermanent as the objects it understands.

True wisdom and insight (*vipassanā*) can be defined by the results they bring. Insight can be said to be a moment of wisdom and always leads the mind to let go; the deepest insights take us in that way into full absorption *samādhi*. This means deep insight cannot be followed by thought because from deep insight the mind goes still, unmoving. Furthermore this wisdom does not just lead to an acceptance of the world, or of suffering but also to liberation from it – detachment, an end to suffering.

Wisdom and *samādhi* working together

Thinking about the right kind of things in an ordinary way can develop wisdom but only superficially. It doesn't reach the heart. This is because normally the heart is obstructed by mental qualities called 'hindrances', as though it's wrapped up and nothing can get through.

The antidote to this situation is to develop *samādhi*, which calm and temporarily remove the hindrances. Then the heart becomes clear, replete, satisfied, still, open, wieldy and pliable. Such a state can be turned to good advantage because whatever wisdom is developed can go straight in, and the deeper the *samādhi* the clearer we can see and the more certain our wisdom becomes.

From here we see that these two qualities work together and enhance each other. The increase and relationship between wisdom and *samādhi* can be compared to walking. One step with the left foot – establish a certain level of concentration –, then one step with the right foot – develop wisdom –, and with that wisdom the mind calms down and stabilizes further, so we can take another step. In this way we walk the path of wisdom and *samādhi* and we come to see that the deepest wisdom arises from a mind brought to stillness.

Developing wisdom, receiving wisdom

It is important to know that wisdom or insight is something that comes to us, that happens to us – which we need to let happen. The training for this to happen is on the other hand something we do, and is not the same thing. In the training we study, ponder and at the highest level we build up a state of calm and use different methods of visualization and observation to train, give rise and strengthen our wisdom state, our knowing.

Wisdom has the qualities of stillness, brightness, awakeness and knowingness. If we can recognize these qualities in our mind then we know that our contemplation has given rise to wisdom. If, however, none of these qualities arise then we can conclude that it was just thinking or proliferation in the language of *Dhamma*. Proliferation can be said to be when the mind is spinning on its own, contemplation is when we deliberately apply the mind to an object.

The knowing that can arise is of a different kind compared to our ordinary knowing or knowledge. With this stronger, deeper knowing comes a greater sense of certainty which deepens the stillness of our minds and reduces our suffering. We can say that we are going from just being aware to really knowing, an inner knowing – the awakening of “the one who knows”.

The way to awaken our deepest knowing is to use questioning and investigation in regard to our body: “are these nails permanent?” or more general and continuous enquiry like “how is it really, having a human body?” Or this can be just by keeping the body in mind. We can realise that attachment to our bodies, our sense of physical need, underlies our suffering because as we let go of the grasp on the body this miraculously disappear. The body is the only place where we can see impermanence (our own mortality) with total clarity in the here and now. Also, after emerging from absorption *samādhi*, when the hindrances are no longer present, the body is the only object there to investigate. So by just keeping the mind focused on the body we let it realise for itself the impermanence of things and if its genuine insight we at the same time see the unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and selflessness (*anattā*). These three are always seen together in deep insight and yet it could be any of the three that is seen first. Also, they are really only fully seen in comparison to something that is not impermanent – the non-changing, still *citta*.

It's by developing this wisdom, the Thai Forest Masters say, that total liberation can be attained, the highest happiness – peace, bliss, *nibbāna*.