Wisdom and Insight

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 56:59

Tonight I'd like to talk about wisdom, the wisdom of the Buddha, which is actually quite specific because it really specifically addresses the question of dukkha, of how we suffer, why we suffer.

When the Buddha had his awakening, it's said that he looked out at the world and saw that while beings really are hoping for happiness, while beings are acting in ways that they think will bring them happiness, they're actually behaving in exactly the opposite way. Typically in seeking for happiness we tend to think that having things will make us happy, or that perhaps seeking to become someone will make me happy—a respected person, a liked person.

The Buddha recognized that this way of trying to find happiness is really depending on things, relying on finding our happiness in dependence on things that are really outside of our control. And so it's not a very reliable, not a very wise way to try to find happiness. If we're seeking to have things to make us happy, those very things are impermanent, unreliable, destined to decay. If we are seeking for happiness based on becoming someone or having respect or fame or good opinions of other people, that relies on the opinions of other people. How reliable is that?

And so in his awakening, the Buddha really had a shift of perspective about where happiness can be found. His proposal is that it's not so much the not having that makes us feel dissatisfied, that we're engaged in this dukkha, but rather it's the wanting to have. The wanting to have is the source of our struggle. And so this fundamental shift, the wisdom that the Buddha offers us, is around this fundamental shift: How can true happiness be found?

Within the teachings of the Buddha, there are a couple of different ways that wisdom is brought into the teaching. One explicit way it's brought in is in the threefold training: sila, samadhi, paññā. Sila is ethics, samadhi is concentration, paññā is wisdom. That threefold training, that gradual training, is understood to be overlaid on top of the Eightfold Path, where the wisdom is found in the first two aspects of the Eightfold Path: wise understanding and wise intention.

So what is wise view, wise understanding? This is defined in different ways, different perspectives actually of how we can look at what it means to have wise understanding. The most common way is framed around dukkha. No big surprise, because this is the problem the Buddha was trying to solve. And so wise understanding is the understanding of the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

That wisdom also incorporates the actions the Buddha suggested that we take with respect to those truths: that we understand suffering, that we let go of the cause of suffering, that we realize the cessation of suffering, and that we cultivate the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

So the wisdom of the Buddha in this teaching includes the understandings that we need to connect with—that there is suffering, how suffering is caused, that it's possible for suffering to end, and that there is a path. But also this wisdom includes that we have to practice. We have to take action on these truths. It's not about believing them. The belief in these truths doesn't do much for us, but the action, the cultivating the understanding of suffering, that supports us. And this is the way that wisdom grows in us.

Another way that wisdom is defined in the texts—there's quite a few different ways, but one very central way—is recognizing and understanding what is skillful in terms of leading us away from suffering and what is unskillful in terms of our actions. Those actions that are unskillful tend to cement, re-cement the process of craving in our minds. Actions that are skillful tend to help us to move away from that craving. So the actions that are unskillful are those that are based in greed, in aversion, in delusion. The actions that are skillful are those that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. And so again, this wisdom of the Buddha is pointing us to how we can engage. What are actions we can take that will support us? What are actions to let go of?

In this exploration of both these definitions—the teaching on the Four Noble Truths and this exploration of what's skillful and what's unskillful—there is an understanding that cause and effect underlies our lives. The skillful actions that we can take will be a cause that will lead to the effect of increasing happiness in our lives. The letting go of the unskillful actions will have that same effect. Skillful actions tend to lead us towards happiness; unskillful actions tend to lead us towards suffering.

And so this teaching, the wisdom that actions have consequences, is deeply embedded in the teachings of the Buddha. We begin to see this as we explore what it means to understand suffering. As we understand suffering, we begin to see the cause and effect relationship. Exploring suffering, we begin to see what causes it.

We begin to see this pattern of cause and effect. And as the mind begins to see this pattern, it begins to recognize that certain things help us, certain things are skillful, certain things are unskillful. So all of these teachings on wisdom are really interwoven. They're stated in different ways, but I really see that they are interconnected.

Another definition of wise understanding is stated in terms of this cause and effect nature of experience through the teaching on dependent origination, which is basically an elaboration of the Second Noble Truth that describes how suffering is created. The Second Noble Truth states that suffering has a cause, and its cause is craving. The teaching on dependent origination elaborates that teaching.

There's one sutta in which the Buddha is asked, "What is wise understanding?" And he says that in this

world, mostly people are enamored either with the idea of existence or the idea of non-existence. But one with wise understanding, when things come into being, the idea of non-existence doesn't occur to them. And when things fall out of being, as things disappear, the idea of existence doesn't occur to them. He says that the teaching of the middle is that when this is, that is—things are dependent on conditions. And he goes through the teaching on dependent origination in that discussion. So this is another definition of wisdom. All these pieces—the understanding of suffering, what supports us to move away from suffering, what we need to let go of, the understanding of cause and effect—all of these pieces are the wisdom of the Buddha. The Buddha, exploring his own experience, came to articulate the wisdom in these forms.

There's another way that wisdom is described in the suttas, a teaching that says there are different kinds of wisdom or different levels of wisdom. There's the wisdom that comes from listening, reading, hearing information. They talk about this as a form of wisdom. The term for this is *sutamayā paññā*, *suta* being the term for hearing, *paññā* being the word for wisdom. So *sutamayā paññā* is the wisdom that comes from hearing. This is the first place where the wisdom comes from for our practice—we hear some teachings.

The second kind of wisdom is connected to our ability to think and reflect. This is called *cintāmayā paññā*. That learning we've experienced through hearing, through reading, we take it in. We start thinking about it, reflecting on it. Does this make sense to me? How does it make sense to me? And in the teachings of the Buddha, in what we've heard, there is this encouragement to engage. So part of this reflective process is asking: does this make sense enough to me to engage, to practice, to put these teachings into action?

At the beginning of our practice, and often throughout our practice, we need to hear teachings, we need to reflect. The teachings of the Buddha, the wisdom of the Buddha—I find them, at least, to be quite inspiring, this possibility of freedom. It lifts my heart, it makes me sense that perhaps this is possible. And initially there's a kind of faith that may happen, not necessarily based in anything tangible in ourselves, but the faith that somebody else has said this works. "Maybe I could try this."

And in fact, that's how it felt to me when I first met the teachings of the Buddha. Somebody had sent me a book. I was in a space of pretty severe suffering, and I read through this book and gleaned this little bit of wisdom out of it. Most of my suffering at that time was around afflictive emotions. And the little bit of wisdom that I gleaned, if I had to articulate it now, would be something like: rather than acting on those emotions, turn your attention and notice them.

My response to that was, "Well, how's that going to work? How's that going to do any good?" But I had really hit bottom. And so there was this teaching, and there was a statement in the book that this is helpful, this has helped—it had helped the author of the book. And I thought, "Well, nothing else has worked. Why don't I give this a try?" That's how it felt to me, that willingness to engage with the wisdom of the Buddha.

That's kind of how our faith might feel at the beginning—just a willingness, a willingness to give it a try.

So those first two kinds of wisdom need to be put into action. It's not just about taking in information and thinking about it. We need to engage. And it is that engagement that begins to lead to the third kind of wisdom: the wisdom of cultivation of mind, the wisdom of experiential understanding—bhāvanā-mayā paññā, a wisdom of insight.

These three kinds of wisdom, I've seen in my practice, spiral on each other. With some insight, with some recognition of the benefits of the practice, there's an interest in deepening the understanding of the teachings, which leads to further reflection, a further engagement, which leads to a deepening of the insight. So these kinds of wisdom support each other. It's not like we gain all the information first and think about it and then practice. It's really a spiral, a deepening spiral into the terrain of this wisdom.

I'd like to explore with you tonight some of the different ways we actually experience wisdom—not in the abstract, not just as ideas. I'd like to explore some of the things I've noticed, ways that I've experienced this wisdom arising.

The first thing that is helpful to connect with, or to recognize, or perhaps to open to, is that wisdom develops through contact with dukkha. When dukkha is happening, it's not a mistake. This is our learning. This is the place where wisdom can develop. We're cultivating, we're following the teachings of the Buddha, and the Buddha's teachings are about understanding dukkha. Joseph sometimes says that we want insight into dukkha, we want to see clearly into dukkha, but without experiencing the dukkha. This dukkha is not a mistake. It's the pointer to how we cling, as I talked about a couple of weeks ago.

There are different ways that wisdom functions, and those first two kinds—the wisdom of learning, the wisdom of reflection—can be helpful to us in our practice. There are times, if we're struggling, when it can be helpful to consciously reflect, to bring in, to actually allow wisdom thoughts to come into our mind. This might be as simple as remembering, consciously connecting when we're experiencing something—when we're experiencing a state of anger, consciously recognizing: this is dukkha. Or: this is impermanent. This kind of reflection.

So this is using wisdom. It's clearly not that we know it as truth for ourselves in that moment. But I've seen for myself, in bringing these kinds of reflections in, how helpful it is to create a little bit of space around the difficulty. This is one way we can use wisdom in our practice.

I encourage people to find language that really resonates with them for these wisdom reflections. We have all been practicing here, we've all been practicing for quite a long time, all have had flavors of insights, different kinds of insights. So how have those insights landed for you? You might be able to find a way to articulate that for yourself in a short phrase. One that I like, borrowed from my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, that happens to really resonate for me, is: this is nature. What is happening right now is a very natural phenomenon. It's happening because of causes and conditions. It's already happening. It's like there's a tree growing in front of me—this tree is already here. I might as well not deny it. This is nature.

The three core insights of vipassanā are around: this is dukkha, this is impermanent or unreliable, this is not me, not mine, not who I am. This is a process of causes and conditions. There are various ways to phrase those core insights. Finding a language that works for you in bringing in this wisdom can be very helpful.

And wisdom can sometimes be more intuitive in a way. We can recognize, we can have a sense—for instance, if we have a decision to make and we're sitting with ourselves, feeling into that decision, perhaps trying on various scenarios—there can be an intuitive sense of: hmm, not quite right. Or: that lands, that resonates. That kind of wisdom takes in, or encompasses, our understanding of ethics, our understanding of suffering.

So it's a broader kind of wisdom. It can often be felt, I find, in the area of the chest. And then there's the kind of wisdom that we may tend to seek out or hope for—the really clear seeing where the mind just goes, "Wow, look at that! Oh my God, things are really impermanent." Suddenly the mind sees the impermanence in a split second, really clearly seeing into something in a moment. So there are different ways that we might experience wisdom.

Let me offer some specific examples. One that's very common, really common, is a feeling of a shift of perspective around an experience. We're caught in something, exploring it, trying to meet it with mindfulness, and then there's a little bit of a shift of perspective. "Oh, this is just frustration. This is just depression. This is just wanting." There's that shift when it suddenly becomes, "Oh." That's a time when the resistance falls away. Wisdom is operating in that moment.

What I'm partly exploring here today is to point to ways that wisdom arises in your practice, and the recognition of it as wisdom. We begin to see that this is not me doing this shift of perspective. We can't do that. I remember on some of my early retreats, after I'd had some shifts of perspective, I was like, "Wow, that's so amazing." Then I would sit down at my next sitting and get all upset and feel pressured that I had to do that again. And it's like, "Oh, I can't do that again." Well, of course you can't do that again. It's conditions that come together. I can't choose to make wisdom arise. It's not under personal control. It is, however, something that we can cultivate the conditions for. We can bring our attention to our experience, and wisdom can arise. We can see that shift. So the seeing of wisdom arising cultivates more wisdom. It's a support for the cultivation of wisdom to actually see and recognize wisdom.

This shift of perspective that we have—one way I think about it is that it's almost like putting a car into neutral. When we are engaged in some afflictive emotional state, it's like the gears are engaged. We've got our foot on the gas. Those thoughts in our mind about the difficulties are like our foot on the gas. The gears are engaged and the momentum is building. Then we recognize, "Oh, this is just anger," and it's kind of like the gears get disengaged.

Now when the gears are disengaged like that, it's not that the momentum of those gears stops immediately. When you think about being in a car going down the freeway at a hundred miles an hour

and you put the car into neutral, the car doesn't stop. So with this shift of perspective, this form of wisdom, the car goes into neutral, the mind goes into neutral, but the momentum of that difficulty doesn't necessarily stop right away.

This is not to denigrate this form of wisdom. If we sit in a car after it's been put into neutral, it will come to a stop, because we're no longer giving it the momentum, no longer giving it the gas. Likewise, when we disengage the gears of our mind, perhaps that pattern, that difficult, afflictive emotion, doesn't stop right away. But we're looking at it from a larger perspective. And we can simply watch it wind down and watch the momentum of that pattern dissipate.

Another way that we can experience wisdom is in seeing the causes and conditions of a pattern as it unfolds. Looking at a familiar pattern, perhaps one that recurs for you—each time you look at that pattern, each time you recognize, "Oh, there it is again, there it is again," if we can look at that pattern again and again and again, the mind begins to gather data about that pattern. Each time that pattern appears, there's a little bit more data about it. And the wisdom of the mind begins to put that data together, begins to understand some of the consequences of that pattern.

In my early explorations around anger, for instance, I began to recognize that initially my sense of anger was that it was going to cause the person I was angry at suffering. I was completely oblivious to the suffering it was causing me. Each time I looked at it, each time I brought my attention to that pattern over and over again, the mind got its education that this is suffering, this is dukkha.

This kind of wisdom of the mind putting together these patterns—there's an analogy that I find resonates with this. I just imagine way back in the time of early humans, before we had any books about the stars, any shared knowledge about what's up there in the heavens. Every night, on a clear night, people might go out and look up at the stars. Each night you look up—that's the pattern. Over and over again, over the course of many nights, many years, many observations, the understanding of patterns began to develop. The understanding that there's a kind of background of stars, and then there seem to be some lights that move through that background pattern. Over the years, seeing how those happen in a regular pattern. It's phenomenal to me to think about how many observations it took to understand what we understand about the stars.

Our understanding of our own minds unfolds in this way. We observe over and over again. The mind begins to put together the patterns. The mind begins to understand the patterns. The mind begins to understand: these experiences are suffering, these are the situations that lead to that suffering, these are ways to move away from that suffering. Again, this is wisdom at work, the wisdom of the mind.

As the mind starts to see these causes and conditions, the recognition develops over time. This anger—this is suffering. Any afflictive emotion, grasping, craving. Craving is one that can be hard initially to recognize as suffering in itself. We're so focused on the thing we want and the idea that when we get it, everything's going to be great, that we don't actually see that in the process of that getting, there's a cramping and a

holding. The very wanting itself is suffering.

The mind seeing this over and over again helps to explain, I think, why it takes so long for us to get it. Craving is suffering. The pattern has been so entrenched: get what you want, you'll be happy. Get what you want, you'll be happy. And we miss the suffering of the craving itself. The more we can see that, the more we recognize that, the more the mind begins to understand it. The mind knows viscerally—the body and mind know—that craving is suffering. And then as the mind sees itself heading in that direction, it begins to recognize: that way is not such a good way to go.

I think I said this a couple weeks ago—that the organism kind of inclines towards well-being, but it fundamentally misunderstands how well-being is to be found. This exploration with mindfulness begins to reveal much more deeply how true well-being can be found. Seeing the causes and conditions, seeing that this way lies suffering, the mind choosing not to go there—that's wisdom.

Sometimes it can feel like we bring in the wisdom of that. We see this habit, and we think, "I want that thing, but I've seen over and over again that it leads to suffering, so let me just not do that." It can sometimes feel like an intentional choice, and there is wisdom in that as well. And sometimes it's more like the mind just knows: no, we don't do that. We don't go there. That way lies suffering. Different levels of wisdom arising.

We can also see wisdom in the recognition that something happening in the present moment is just a phenomenon happening in the present moment. Many of you have reported this recognition—that a thought is arising, even a very charged kind of thought, and the recognition that that thought is just a thought in the present moment. It's just a phenomenon arising in the mind. In that seeing of thoughts as phenomena arising in the present mind, often there's a recognition that there's been a cause for that thought. Sometimes that recognition of "this is just a thought" comes with the understanding that it's just arising as a phenomenon—a set of causes and conditions have created that thought. And so that begins to point us to the recognition that this thought is not mine, it's not me, it's not who I am.

Another way we can see wisdom, and this one's a little different, is seeing the non-arising of defilement, of kilesa—mind states that are based in greed, aversion, and delusion. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha talks about seeing the non-arising of the hindrances in particular. He says that one recognizes the non-arising of a hindrance. On one retreat somebody asked, "Well, how does one see the non-arising of something?" I reflected on it and came up with four different ways that I've explored in my own practice. This is actually an interesting thing to recognize—when something is not arising, especially when it's a hindrance or a pattern so familiar to you, a familiar pattern of depression or loneliness.

or of anxiety.

If you can recognize when it is not present, when it's not arising, that does a great deal—it really helps to undermine our belief in its "me-ness." When we see that it's not always there, we see that it's not me. So it

shows us the impermanence of those states, and it begins to poke holes in the identity we have around them, to recognize when they are not present.

So how do we recognize when these defilements don't arise?

The first way I reflected on is through the teaching of right effort, which talks about a kind of skillful avoiding. With right effort, we cultivate the effort—I think the way it's phrased is—we cultivate the effort to the non-arising of unwholesome states that have not arisen. One way to explore this is to recognize that as we examine our experience, we see certain things land us in suffering. Perhaps it's a good idea not to follow through on those conditions. So we begin to see the conditions that take us to suffering, and we can actively refrain from going there. We learn through experience what leads us to the defilement, and we avoid that.

Now, you might think—for instance, this can be kind of subtle—you might find yourself getting annoyed in the lunch line. And you might think, "Well, the way to avoid that defilement of annoyance is to avoid the lunch line, to just wait for twenty minutes and go when it's empty." And that is one way to avoid that defilement.

Another way to avoid or protect—to put it in a more positive way, we protect our mind from defilement—is through mindfulness: standing in the lunch line and observing our minds, beginning to see what are the conditions for that annoyance. It's not just the standing in the lunch line; there are some other things going on. So using mindfulness as a form of protection there. We can acknowledge what things lead us toward a defilement and avoid those things. That's the simplest way of seeing the non-arising.

Another way is one that I think all of you can reflect on, and that is this: in your practice, you have had experiences. You are experiencing less suffering now than you did before. This kind of reflection—seeing some situation arise here and now in the moment, some suffering around a particular situation—you may be able through reflection to recognize, "Hmm, five years ago this would have been a far more serious thing for my mind." So essentially seeing there's less suffering now than there was five years ago. Again, this is using reflection, but it is a way of connecting with the fact that hindrances, defilements are not arising.

Probably the most direct way to see the non-arising of a defilement is when the mindfulness gets more continuous and the mind can begin to see intention—the seeing of intention in the mind before an action follows. We can begin to see the intention toward an outburst, or the intention toward even an emotional state, the intention to say something or do something unwholesome. In seeing the arising of that intention toward something unwholesome, if the mind is really clearly present to see that unwholesome intention arise, the mind can let go of it in that way I was talking about before. Knowing that that way lies suffering, the mind can simply let go.

And in that split second of seeing the arising of that intention and seeing the mind let go of it, you directly in that moment see the non-arising of that suffering. It does not arise. You see that if you'd not been there, if you'd not been present to see that unwholesome intention, the mind would have just picked right up on that intention and gotten on that train and done that thing and fallen into the suffering. So as the mindfulness gets more continuous, you can actually more directly see this non-arising as an actual experience.

The last way I thought of in terms of seeing the non-arising of defilement is essentially the knowing that defilement is not present in the mind when there is love, compassion, joy, or equanimity present. You recognize the mind is balanced. Defilement is not here. And that's a feeling as well—the mind is free of defilement in that moment.

I'd like to also take a few minutes to distinguish between different kinds of insights. I've been talking about the insights in our practice around seeing into anicca, impermanence; dukkha, unreliability; anatta, not-self. There are also psychological insights that we have. We begin to see how our personal patterns were created, our particular flavors of difficulty. And this can be one of the great benefits of our practice—that we begin to see into how our own minds have been trained.

For myself, I think I mentioned the pattern of self-hatred as one that was pretty predominant for me. On one retreat, I began seeing into that pattern from the perspective of my life, my history, my conditioning, and how it was related to relationships. And there was a really clear recognition at one point of the interplay of those relationships and a big opening. It felt like a big opening around the self-hatred, a feeling of compassion and forgiveness in terms of the various relationships that had been at play in its creation. I really saw this is causes and conditions in a way. I saw so much how, of course, the self-hatred is part of my life.

It was such a feeling of opening that I really felt like there'd been a big breakthrough around that self-hatred. An understanding had come there. That's what I would call a psychological insight, because it was a connection to understanding the history and how that history came into play around that pattern.

And there were a few days that I was without self-hatred after that particular recognition. But I was surprised when, some days later, the pattern of self-hatred came back just as strong. That psychological insight had given me some understanding of the conditions at play, but it hadn't really deeply undercut the pattern. I was surprised. I actually thought the mind had let go of that pattern. I saw that no, it hadn't.

But what I did see—the benefit of that psychological insight, a great benefit—was that it gave me a deeper understanding that yes, this is from causes and conditions. So it did take some of the identification out of that pattern. It took some of the personal sting out of that pattern of self-hatred. And so it was a little easier, a little less threatening, when that self-hatred arose. It was a little easier to meet the pattern every time it came up. And it came up again and again on that retreat.

So psychological insights have a role in our practice. They definitely support us.

The vipassanā insights came later. On that same retreat, I ended up having a deep insight into just the thoughts around self-hatred. After several more weeks of looking at this pattern, spending so much time with it, one evening I was just watching the pattern over and over again. And at some moment, I saw the very arising of the thought that was associated with that self-hatred—the barest little filament of that thought coming up. In seeing that arising, with mindfulness pretty present and continuous, the mind in that instant saw: this is just a thought. It has no reality.

That was really an insight into the ephemeral nature of the thoughts around that pattern. That insight was surprising, actually. In that very moment of seeing that this is just a thought, I went from self-hatred to bliss in a split second. And then there was this thought that occurred to me: "Oh, never again. I'll never feel self-hatred again." The next thought was: "No, this insight is for here and now. This recognition is the causes and conditions that come together in this moment to let me see this."

So it was an insight into the ephemeral nature, the anattā nature, of that thought. And it did have a very deep impact on that pattern. That recognition allowed a major uprooting of it. Not that it's completely gone, not that the thoughts are gone. What seems to be gone is the belief in those thoughts. And in a split second, that seemed to happen.

The vipassanā insights have this power—this really deep power—to loosen our holding, our clinging, our attachments. They can have that power. And there are many times when it is just seeing it again and again and again, like the wearing away of something. Over and over we see it, like looking up at the stars, and the mind slowly puts together the understanding, and the wisdom grows.

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