Wisdom and Freedom (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 59:20

My heart feels so full sitting here and seeing you and knowing the work that you're doing, what you are exploring and seeing and understanding.

We've been here for three weeks, and it is such a privilege to witness what's unfolding for those of you who I'm meeting with, but also in talking with the other teachers, what's unfolding for everyone. About seventy-eight different retreats happening. And an amazing quality of the Dharma is that it meets all seventy-eight retreats.

The other night Jaya spoke about a kaleidoscope and how the Dharma can be like a kaleidoscope. The kaleidoscope has all the little bits of glass or crystals—I have one with shells in it that I particularly love. The same shells, but a little turn and you see it in a completely different way. The Dharma can be like that. We can look at the Dharma from different perspectives, different angles, to get different understandings perhaps, but all pointing at the same truth.

Tonight I'd like to turn that kaleidoscope a little bit and continue the exploration of the last few nights on the Four Noble Truths and the path by orienting around the Third Noble Truth and what supports that—what supports that realization of the release of dukkha, the realization of the release of suffering. There will be some overlap in terms of what others have said, but to me it feels like this is a really good place to linger, this topic.

One of my core teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, has said that the purpose of practice is the development of wisdom. Wisdom is found in the list of the five faculties, which are five qualities that support the path of practice. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about them as five qualities that are alive moment to moment in our practice and that may shape how we're meeting the experience in a particular moment.

These five faculties are confidence, faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Perhaps sometimes faith is strong, and that motivates energy, that motivates us to practice, which develops the mindfulness. The momentum of mindfulness creates that concentration which allows a cultivation of the wisdom. And then that wisdom further supports our confidence, supports our wish, our willingness, our engagement with the practice.

Sometimes wisdom may be very strong in clearly seeing. At other times, mindfulness may be strong in seeing things, but not with the clarity to just have things go poof—to have some of those reactive patterns and habits go poof. And so that's a time when wisdom is being developed.

The wisdom connected with the path of practice is associated with understanding suffering. Jaya

mentioned this the other night. The Buddha said, "I teach only suffering and the end of suffering." So all of the understanding that is developed is looking at understanding how suffering arises, the things that put it together, the causes of suffering, the possibility of its release, and the skills, the tools, the practices that support the cultivation of seeing that release. That's the classic definition of wisdom, really—the seeing of the Four Noble Truths.

As Jaya spoke about, it's present at the beginning as an understanding and is with us all the way along the path and is what is understood at the end. We come to completely see through how our minds create not only the suffering, not only the craving, the clinging—those being qualities of mind that our minds are engaging in—but our minds are also creating everything that we're clinging to.

Wisdom sounds like something—I don't know, just the definition of wisdom we may have from our lives sounds like something that is like something we'd have in a book. But in the practice, as I've come to understand it through exploring the experience of wisdom, it's an activity of mind. Wisdom is that function of mind, that activity which engages with those actions connected with the Four Noble Truths.

The activity of wisdom is to recognize suffering, to understand it. When there's an understanding of suffering, wisdom is working. The activity of wisdom is to let go of the craving. When that happens, wisdom is working. The activity of wisdom is to realize the release of suffering. And the entire path is cultivated through this development of wisdom.

Wisdom develops in relationship to seeing the impermanent, unreliable, conditioned nature of experience, seeing the not-self nature of experience. And as that wisdom grows strong, as we clearly see the nature of experience in this way, the mind, imbued with that wisdom, the activity of wisdom releases the suffering.

It releases the suffering when there is clinging, and it also recognizes that these things are not worth picking up. So this framing of realizing the release of suffering—sometimes we do experience it that way, as a feeling of release. Other times, it's felt as something much subtler: just not picking up anything that would lead to craving. Just not picking it up. The mind simply doesn't go there. It understands that way leads to suffering. There's just no movement in that direction to pick it up.

This not picking up is the freedom. This is Nibbana—the ending of suffering. And in the suttas, it's primarily described by what it is not: non-clinging, the absence of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. Nibbana is not something we get. It's not a thing to get. It is the absence of craving, the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Jaya quoted this the other night: "This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

That phrase—as I was reading this the last couple of days, thinking about this talk—the phrase

"non-reliance on craving" really landed for me. It startled me. Why would I rely on craving? But when I look at what my mind does, that's exactly what it does. It relies on craving to navigate the world. Craving believes that craving is the answer. And so we rely on it to find happiness. This phrase, "non-reliance on craving"—for me, it just touched the heart, let it soften a little, let that phrase reverberate.

One of the clearest definitions in the suttas of Nibbana is the ending or absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—the extinction of greed, aversion, and delusion. I'm going to read a few quotes strung together. I think they're from a book by Nyanaponica called *The Word of the Buddha*, a little booklet that gathered all the teachings of the Buddha. The Four Noble Truths are said to encompass all the teachings of the Buddha, and under each truth, he brought together the relevant teachings. It's one of my favorite books.

Under the Third Noble Truth, he put together these quotes:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana. Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain and grief. This is Nibbana—immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

"And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing remains to be done. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind—neither the desired nor the undesired—can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind. Gained is deliverance. This is peace. This is exquisite."

The resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana.

In those quotes, there are a couple of phrases that really resonate with me. One: "If lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one experiences no mental pain or grief." That sounds pretty good. It doesn't mean there won't be physical pain, and it doesn't mean there isn't a feeling of resonating with the suffering of the world. Dispassion allows room for vast compassion. When the heart is not constricted with greed, aversion, and delusion, there's room for so much connection, so much resonance of heart with both the joy and the sorrow, held with balance of mind.

Sometimes I think we might hear these descriptions and find them sounding kind of flat. Why would I want that? But as we practice, we do begin to get little tastes of what it means when the mind has let go of greed, aversion, and delusion. And it feels anything but disconnected and flat. It feels incredibly connected. So: "experiences no mental pain and grief."

The other phrase that strikes me is "visible in this life." This description of freedom, of nibbana being the

extinction of greed, aversion, and delusion—the little experiences I've had along the way of when the mind does let go of greed or aversion, or sees clearly—this is a kind of experience I've seen as possible not just when sitting on a cushion with eyes closed in stillness, but when I'm in my kitchen cutting an apple. Freedom in a moment. The mind not going somewhere. The possibility of the ending of greed, aversion, and delusion in this life. And my aspiration is in this lived life, not just in this life sitting in meditation. This possibility of carrying what we're doing here into the world.

This cultivation of wisdom that allows for this release—wisdom being the wholesome quality of mind that does the activity of letting go—the cultivation of wisdom is gradual. Kim spoke to this, about the gradual nature of the path, bringing in the image of fading away with viraga, dispassion. I love that in the teaching of liberative dependent arising, or transcendent dependent origination, this aspect of the path, viraga, is actually a metaphor—this fading away. Raga is like the fading of color of a cloth that's been dyed a bright color. You might put that cloth in the sun and it gradually fades. So that's the process: the fading away of greed, aversion, and delusion in our minds.

There are many stories in the suttas of sudden awakenings, but most of those happened after a long time of practice. So there is that gradual cultivation, the gradual development of wisdom.

There's another analogy in the suttas about the rigging of a ship wearing away. The story goes something like this: after a ship has been out at sea for six months, where the rigging has been getting used, exposed to the elements, splashed by salt water, exposed to the sun and the wind—at some point that ship gets hauled up onto dry land. It sits on dry land and it's exposed to more elements: the cold, the sand blowing on it from the land, more wind and sun and water. Over the course of months, that rigging rots away. It falls apart.

I think of this as the rotting rope analogy. Think about a piece of rope you might come across on a beach somewhere. If you come back to that beach day after day, you might not see much change in that rope. But maybe one day, six months later, you come back and think, "Oh, that piece of rope is still here. Let me pick it up and take it away." And you try to pick it up, and it just disintegrates because it's been worn away moment by moment, day by day, by the elements.

This is an analogy for the path of practice, for its gradual nature. Each moment of mindfulness is like a grain of sand across that rope. It takes many moments for the clinging to wear away.

Now, that may sound depressing. But there's a saying: the Dharma is good in the beginning, the Dharma is good in the middle, and the Dharma is good in the end. Because we do taste—we get little tastes of wisdom at work. And I heard that James told a little bit of my story. Within the first couple months of my practice, I saw something about anger. Anger was something that was making me pretty non-functional at the time, and I was looking at it just in a really basic way. After having spent a couple months observing it in daily life, there came this moment of seeing. I had no training whatsoever other than a little sentence in a book that said, "Try observing your difficult emotions rather than acting on them." Okay, I guess I'll see what

that's like.

And the first time I really saw the anger, it was like, "Wow, I did not know this hurt." My mind had believed—that reliance on craving and clinging—the mind had believed that anger was going to do something for me.

It was going to make the person I was angry at miserable so that I would somehow feel better because they were miserable. This was what the mind was doing with this idea.

The first time I really felt it, it was like, wow, that is so painful. I have no idea what to do with this. I guess I go back to work. I was sitting at my computer, frozen, when this happened.

I had set an intention to wake up every time I experienced anger, and I did that for months. The process was slow and gradual. I did begin noticing that the anger wasn't as strong when I noticed it. Now, retrospectively, I know that the mindfulness was becoming very attuned to anger and arising more quickly as the anger was coming up. So it wasn't as painful, it wasn't as strong. It was much easier to say, "Oh yeah, there it is," and get on with my day.

I didn't have any guidance on feeling it in my body. I knew nothing, really—I was such a beginner. But just the power of this simple, simple practice in daily life was remarkable. I had not ever sat down to meditate while I was doing this.

And then one day, I was in my kitchen cutting an apple. The memory of the person I was angry at arose—we were together at a fruit stand in the Sacramento River Valley. I could see that the memory was connected to what I was doing, to cutting the apple. That was a conditioned thing; I could see that.

What I'm describing here took place in a split second, though it takes a while to describe. I saw that thought about this person I was angry with, and I felt this freight train of energy, this pull of "Oh yeah, I really want to jump on that thought and think more thoughts to get angry." I felt the intention toward anger there.

And what happened in that moment—and again, I know this retrospectively—is that wisdom arose. Not consciously, really, but in a way that recognized: that way lies anger. And my mind said, "I don't have to get on that thought. I don't have to go there."

I didn't believe it, because I had not had this person come up in my mind without anger arising. So I was standing there, waiting for the anger to come up. And it did not arise.

I sank to my knees with gratitude. It was a moment of seeing the non-arising of something that had been so powerful in my experience. And I knew: this stuff works. I will be doing this for the rest of my life. This works.

So this is the practice, just in a simple way. And I had never even sat down to meditate before I saw this.

Actually, it was around that time that I thought, "Gee, maybe they call it practice because it helps you see these things in daily life. So maybe I'll sit down and meditate." That experience pulled me into the practice.

The practice of satipaṭṭhāna, the gradual development of seeing experience even in this really simple way, can give rise to very profound understanding. Wisdom growing, in that case really grain by grain, just over the course of those months. Wisdom developing around the suffering of anger. And the wisdom strong enough in that moment when I cut the apple to direct the mind not to go there. I didn't have to do the letting go. I didn't do anything other than stand there with a knife in my hand, watching in amazement as my mind didn't get angry.

Satipaṭṭhāna, our practice, cultivates this wisdom moment by moment. So I want to spend some time exploring the cultivation of wisdom. My teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, spoke about wisdom a lot. He used this word more than most other teachers I've had, and it caught my attention.

He would talk about wisdom at work—"see wisdom at work," he would say. He would talk about using wisdom reflections to help us in our practice.

In the suttas, there's a teaching about three kinds of wisdom. First, there's the wisdom of hearing, learning, listening: *sutamaya paññā*. *Suta* meaning hearing, *maya* meaning to bring into being, and *paññā* meaning wisdom—the wisdom that is brought into being through listening. This is the kind of wisdom that is received from our teachers, from reading books, from studying the Dharma. We have to learn the wisdom somewhere. The Buddha is said to have understood all of this on his own, figured it out without any books or anybody to help him with these wisdom understandings. The rest of us need some help. So there's the learning we engage in through receiving the teachings.

The second kind of wisdom is *cintamaya paññā*—the wisdom that is brought into being through reflection. We hear, we listen, we read, we take in the Dharma, and then we think about it. Does this make sense?

I met this practice through a friend sending me a book when I wrote to her saying I was in the Peace Corps, far away from all of my friends. My friend sent me a book where I read that line: "Try observing your emotions instead of acting on them." I thought about that sentence and concluded it didn't make any sense to me. Wouldn't that just make me more angry? But I did have a little bit of faith because my friend said this was useful, so I borrowed the faith of my friend. And I was at wit's end anyway—nothing else had worked, so I might as well try this. There wasn't real intellectual understanding there, but there was a little bit of willingness to try it out. That's the faith piece. I borrowed the faith of my friend and just tried it out. And then, as I described, within a few months I began to understand how it worked.

That connects with the third kind of wisdom: *bhāvanāmaya paññā*, the wisdom connected with practice, with actually engaging in the practices—not just thinking about it, but doing it. Stepping into the process of looking at experience. This includes both the cultivation of wisdom through practice and the direct experience of wisdom itself, the arising of insight and understanding.

The second kind of wisdom, *cintamaya paññā,* can be really useful in our *bhāvanāmaya paññā*—in the time when we're actually sitting in meditation and cultivating our mindfulness practice. There are times when the mind is a little wobbly or caught by something, and we can drop in wisdom that might help us. Many of you have talked about this. Almost intuitively sometimes this happens. Sometimes wisdom will do this on its own.

I think I mentioned at one point that I was sitting in meditation and a phrase arose—something a teacher had said to me in an interview a year earlier. That phrase arose, and it was exactly the wisdom the mind needed in that moment. It wasn't something I tried to do, but wisdom that arose in a verbal way. "Oh yes, that sounds useful. Let's explore that." Sometimes thoughts can be connected with wisdom, and we can actually use thoughts skillfully in our practice. When we're a little out of balance or wobbly, we might drop in a reminder: "This is impermanent. This is just constructed phenomenon." Sometimes that wisdom can go in quite deeply and allow for a release. But sometimes it just gives us a little more space, lets us settle back and recognize, "Okay, right, I can be with this." Understanding at the intellectual level can support us to meet things at the experiential level.

At one point, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, in one of my interviews with him, asked me to recognize wisdom at work in my experience. "What is it like for you when wisdom is at work?" I said, "I don't think I know what you mean, Sayadaw. I don't think I get it."

But I went off and started to hold that question in my mind. I wasn't really trying to figure it out, but when I noticed some kind of easing of experience or a release from being caught by something, I just thought, well, wisdom must be working there somehow. That's how I began this exploration.

Over the course of quite a bit of time, I've come to see so many different ways that wisdom works. And what I've begun to understand too is that this recognition—because wisdom is a wholesome quality, like concentration, like mindfulness—when we become aware with mindfulness of wholesome qualities, it strengthens them. So becoming aware when wisdom is working tends to strengthen wisdom. This is another way to cultivate it: becoming aware of these moments when wisdom is at work.

Now, that terrain Jaya was talking about—those moments of freedom, little moments, those little moments of just a release of some kind—those are some of the moments when wisdom is at work. I'd like to describe a few of these, by no means comprehensive, but just a few of the ways we might see wisdom at work.

One of the most familiar ways, perhaps, or an early way that we start to see wisdom at work, is when we feel a shift of perspective around something that's been challenging. We've been caught by something—caught by a pattern of frustration or confusion or depression—and then we recognize, "Oh, this is just confusion. I can know this." There's a little feeling of letting go there. It's not that the pattern disappears, but there's some ease around it. It feels like there's space.

One way I sometimes talk about this is through an analogy: when we have our foot on the gas pedal in a car, the gears are engaged and they're going. When we're caught by a pattern, the gears are engaged. But when we can see, "Oh, it's just confusion," it's as if the gears disengage, and the car gets put into neutral. There's no more fuel being added. But when the gears disengage, they don't stop spinning. We still see the pattern working, but there's a lot more ease around it. This is wisdom allowing that disengagement, allowing us to witness, to see how that pattern is feeling, how it affects us.

We might also see the conditioned nature of experience. Sometimes, through this continuity of mindfulness, this kind of thing can happen pretty much any time—in the in-between times or in sitting practice. Just watching a pattern unfold. For instance, sitting in meditation and feeling pressure in the bladder, then recognizing the unpleasantness of that, and realizing it's a good idea to get up and relieve that pressure. Sometimes we can see that unfolding and recognize, "I'm not doing this. This is just conditions arising and conditioning the next thing and the next thing." The conditions of sitting for an hour creating the full bladder, the pressure creating the intention to stand and relieve the pressure—all of that can be seen as not me doing it.

Often we don't quite see it that way. We think, "Oh, I'm getting up and going to relieve myself." But we can see these conditions unfolding and directly understand—the wisdom understands—it's not me doing it. The insight into not-self comes through seeing that conditioned unfolding.

Sometimes we might see experience as simply something arising right in the present moment. A thought arises about the past, and we recognize this is just a thought happening in the present moment. We see it as an arising—it wasn't there a moment ago, it's there now. We see that impermanent nature, arising in this split second.

You may recognize some of these as I talk about them. And you may not have quite recognized them as being manifestations of wisdom. That's part of why I'm naming these things—to support your recognition of this quality that is at work in all of you.

Another understanding that might happen—and one of you in your report today described this, which made me remember it—is beginning to see that everything in our experience, what we are experiencing, is a construct of our own minds.

I see this kind of like our experience as a reflection of what is out there. I don't think of what's in my mind as being completely constructed out of whole cloth. I think you're actually sitting out there. I think there are a bunch of people actually in this room, and it's not just a figment of my imagination. But what I know of it, what this being experiences, is entirely a construct of the mind. And that can be directly seen. It can be quite unsettling to see that.

At one point, seeing this, I think the way it first really expressed itself to me or showed itself to me was that I could see I was clinging to something—I could see the clinging. I could see that the clinging was my

mind doing that. But then recognizing that what I was clinging to was also something my mind made up. The mind just goes, "Yeah, that's ridiculous." We can't actually cling to anything out there. The only thing we cling to is something our minds construct. And we can see this. That is wisdom that is very freeing, as the mind begins to understand its uselessness. Clinging doesn't serve us. We've been relying on something that's not reliable.

I'll just mention one or two more of these. I have a whole list of them here, and I'm not going to get through them all. But one thing I want to point out is that sometimes I've been talking about these wisdoms that arise, that are experienced as a release or a shift, a feeling of letting go. But early on in this talk I mentioned there's also the not picking up—this kind of seeing that there isn't a picking up. There can be a recognition at times that greed, aversion, and delusion are simply not arising.

At one point, following the whole experience I described about anger—that was not the end of my anger, I'm here to tell you. There was a lot of work over the next couple of years. That was not even the last anger about that particular person. But it really gave me the confidence to keep looking at it. And over a couple of years, I kind of watched it grow, watched it, watched it, saw it happening, had to set it aside a lot of the time because it was too strong, stickier, more powerful than the momentum of mindfulness. So I couldn't look at it a lot of the time, but I would see it, I'd bow to it, I'd say, "Yep, I'll get back to you. I promise I'll get back to you."

And I began to notice over the course of probably a couple of years that the pattern wasn't arising as frequently. Then one day—I remember exactly where I was; some of these insights have that quality, seared into your mind—I know exactly where I was walking on my sidewalk when I realized, "Wow, I haven't had that anger come up in a long time." Must have been months. And in that moment, I was thinking about the person I had been so angry at because I remembered the anger I had experienced many times. And I could not even call it up. I could not construct it. It was gone. And I never saw it go away. It disappeared while I wasn't looking.

This is also how wisdom works sometimes. It can work in the background or silently, just that gradual wearing away. It's like I went to pick up that rope of anger and it just wasn't even there anymore. So sometimes wisdom expresses as the non-arising of reactivity. It's just not picked up.

The other example in this category, more directly experienced, is that description I talked about where I saw the mind kind of heading towards anger—not angry in the moment, but leaning like, "Yeah, I want to get angry"—but wisdom took me in another direction. That was a very direct seeing of the non-arising of reactivity.

And then sometimes we're in a space where the mind is just so balanced. A lot of continuity of mindfulness, just seeing experience coming and going, arising and passing. Nothing sticky. Nothing clung to, just slipping through. Again, wisdom is there—not as an experience of release, but as the understanding of non-clinging in that moment.

Sometimes in those meditative states, seeing things very rapidly arise and pass away, there's that kind of understanding. Things are happening so rapidly that the mind understands there isn't anything to cling to. It understands that impermanent and coreless nature—just nothing to cling to.

So these moments of seeing wisdom at work are a pointer to freedom. They probably still have some clinging in them somewhere, because much of the time those kinds of experiences are still experiences. And it's so clear when they're happening. It's like, "Wow, why would I ever pick anything up? Why would I ever want to get angry? Why would I ever do that?" It's just so clear.

I remember on one retreat, I was watching things come and go and seeing the mind just respond with, "Yeah, no, nothing to cling to. Don't pick it up." I was so happy. It was like somebody was whispering in my ear, "Don't cling, don't cling." And then I thought I'd figured it out. Half a day later, when the delusion came back, when that reliance on craving re-arose, it became very clear to me that it is not obvious. It is only obvious with that clarity.

And so insights are impermanent. And yet, as Kim said the other night, we can't unsee them. We know. There's a knowing there, a deep connection with that truth. Even though we can't see it now, the value of having seen it—when we're no longer able to see it directly—is that we now know this is delusion.

Before we really have that clarity or understanding, when delusion is there, it's very hard to see. We can't really recognize it as delusion. We are fully in that reliance on craving. But having seen through it, when the reliance on craving comes back, when those patterns of delusion return, we can see them and know, "Yep, that's delusion."

As Kim said, we can't unsee it. We may not be seeing it directly in this moment, but there's an understanding that can be there, that can support us to have more patience with meeting the pattern again and again and again—as the wisdom gets stronger, develops, and grows gradually.

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