Recognizing Wisdom

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 22:12

This morning I'd like to offer some reflections on recognizing wisdom working in our practice.

We cultivate wisdom not through trying to find it, but by creating conditions that support its development. And one of the main conditions is beginning to be curious about what's in the way of wisdom. So we check the attitude, we begin to get really familiar with those attitudes related to greed, aversion, and delusion. As we see them and begin to understand them, the mind moves more and more in the direction of wise attitude, wise mindfulness—that non-reactive, curious, allowing attention that can learn with experience.

As we find more and more our way to this wise attention, we have the experience of wisdom working. And you've all had experiences of wisdom working. At one point, Sayadaw U Tejaniya explicitly asked me, "What is it like for you when wisdom's working?" That became a kind of curiosity. At first, I wasn't really quite sure what he meant. But as that question was simply held in practice, I began to see many different ways that wisdom expresses itself—wisdom as an activity of mind.

Sometimes Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about getting familiar with the job descriptions of our activities of mind. He would say, get familiar with the job description of aversion or of greed. And this was an encouragement to get familiar with the job description of wisdom. What does wisdom do? How does it function? How is it experienced?

As a wholesome quality, the recognition of it—as we've been talking about—creates the condition for its nourishment. It feeds it. And so the recognition of wisdom at work also nourishes it.

At one point on a retreat I was teaching, somebody asked me a question in the hall: What are the symptoms of wisdom? I like that phrasing of the question. So here are a few ways that I've noticed the symptoms of wisdom. And I'm sure there are many, many others. This is an encouragement both to point to ways in which you've already seen wisdom at work but perhaps didn't quite take it in as that's what's happening—"Oh, this is wisdom doing its job"—and also to inspire a curiosity for yourself about how you experience wisdom working. Because you do.

One way, maybe one of the first ways that we experience wisdom working, is when we feel a shift of perspective around something challenging, where there's not resistance to it. We're seeing it, but there's just a sense of, "Oh, this is just frustration. This is just confusion." And so while the pattern may not disappear, wisdom is supporting the capacity of mind to know it with balance.

We could say, in a way, that part of the job description of wisdom is to understand dukkha really well. Wisdom knows dukkha as dukkha. That's that recognition: "Oh, this is dukkha, this is just anger."

Another part of the job description of wisdom is that it can release dukkha. In that case, the wisdom is perhaps releasing just the reactivity around something—like thinking it's a problem—so that the pattern, though it may have strong momentum, is still seen with some measure of curiosity and interest where learning can happen, where further wisdom can grow.

Sometimes we can see experience simply as a present moment arising, just a pattern arising in this moment. For example, recognizing thoughts of the past arising and recognizing that they're happening now—just a thought happening in this moment.

We may see the conditioned nature of how dukkha is created. For example, we see an idea in our mind about something someone is doing, and then we realize that a reactivity is happening not to what the person is doing but to our ideas about it. Again, wisdom recognizing the process by which dukkha is created. Wisdom often arises, or the development of wisdom is often connected, with the experience of dukkha.

We might also recognize that what has felt like a deep pattern of reactivity, something that happens frequently, is actually created in an instant.

Loneliness, for instance—we may feel a sense that it's a pervasive pattern, but then actually see it arise in dependence on a thought and recognize that it is coming into being in this moment. It did not exist a moment ago. We begin to poke holes in the notion of its pervasiveness, seeing the impermanent nature.

Sometimes wisdom is quite strong, and as soon as it sees a pattern of dukkha, we feel it let go. We feel a release. That release is a symptom of wisdom—it is not the wisdom itself.

The other piece about wisdom is that sometimes wisdom expresses itself as thoughts. Like earlier when I said, "Oh, this is just anger." But the thoughts are not the wisdom. They're perhaps an expression of it. The wisdom is the understanding of the dukkha. We might at times attune to that sense of release as a symptom of wisdom and almost lean into it, or look for it, or use it as a signpost for wisdom. And yet sometimes wisdom can operate almost in the background.

I've had times in practice looking at patterns and seeing how much the mind would be caught by that pattern—anger in particular. When I tried to turn the mindfulness to it, I would just instantly be in the anger and not really able to look at it. So for quite some time, when I saw anger arising and saw the rapidity of it, I would kind of bow to it, acknowledge it, recognize it. "Yep, I see you. And I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger. But right now I'm going to put my attention on my feet. I'm going to pay attention to something neutral."

That whole complex of intention became encapsulated by the phrase "not now" in my mind, with a gentle approach—a feeling of bowing to the anger, "not now," and putting my attention somewhere else. I did that for a long time with one particular pattern, a particular anger around a particular situation that was very charged. I'd see the thoughts about that situation arise and think, "Okay, yep, I feel that—not now."

And I did that redirecting for a long time.

The way wisdom operated in this situation was very quiet, almost imperceptible—actually imperceptible until a certain point. I began noticing slowly, very slowly, that those flares of anger, that movement, were getting a little more spaced apart. They were getting spaced further apart. Instead of being several times a day, it was every few days, or every week or so. It was just very gradually not happening as much.

And then one day—this day when the wisdom became apparent to me—I remember it as one of those things where, when wisdom is strong, when understanding is clear, it gets seared into your mind. I remember exactly where I was when this recognition arose: that I hadn't felt that anger in a long time. That was what arose in that moment. "Gee, I haven't felt that anger at that person, that situation. I haven't felt that in a long time. I don't even know how long it's been."

And of course, in that moment, the thought of that person, the situation, was there in my mind. And I could not find a shred of anger. It was gone. The pattern had released while I wasn't looking. And at some point there was that awareness: it's gone.

This is resonant with some of the descriptions in the suttas of the gradual wearing away of the defilements—the images of the rigging of a ship slowly wearing away. A ship, after having spent a long time at sea with the rigging exposed to the salt water and the sun and the wind, being pulled up on dry land for the season and further exposed to wind and sun and sand, slowly wearing away and eventually falling apart. But each day, not seeing any particular change in that wearing away of the rope. Then one day you notice: oh, it's fallen apart.

So sometimes wisdom doesn't have that kind of feedback of release.

It's simply the non-arising. We recognize that something's not there anymore—a reactivity no longer present.

So just being curious about this quality, this wholesome quality of mind that we are cultivating in this practice: wisdom. Wisdom and awareness are the main two wholesome qualities we actively cultivate, with the rest of the wholesome qualities being revealed through this strengthening of wisdom.

And as we recognize wisdom and cultivate the conditions for wisdom, we receive very clear feedback about the value of the practice—the release from dukkha, the non-arising of dukkha. This supports a further arising of confidence, of faith.

The five faculties that Carol talked about a week ago—with the strengthening of understanding comes a strengthening of confidence, a sense of: yes, this is useful. And with that, there's a strengthening of energy, mindfulness, concentration, and more wisdom.

So let's sit together.

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