

Wisdom Week 2: Wisdom in relation to Change, Clinging and Suffering

This week and next we look at how the Buddhist understanding of Wisdom involves the inter-relationship of three insights about the nature of experience: impermanence/inconstancy, unsatisfactoriness and not-self (*anicca, dukkha* and *anatta* in Pali). Today we take up the relationship of the first two, next week we will explore the meaning of not-self.

The fundamental Buddhist understanding of suffering (“*dukkha*”) is that we are usually engaged in some way (obvious or very subtle) in grasping, clinging or resistance to experience. We don’t realize how this is just adding stress and can never really succeed at getting sensory/mental experience to hold still and be permanently satisfying. On the larger scale of life events, we think we know that things change, but of course we are often quite distressed when loss and change happens to us. On the smaller scale of trying to quiet the mind in meditation, we can see how restless, agitated and dissatisfied the mind can be, seemingly unable to simply rest unperturbed.

As we try to simply rest with the felt sense of the breath and body, allowing sensations to come and go, we might begin to sense the strain or agitation in our constant commentary, our attempts to “make something” out of what’s happening, to fit it all into the story of “me and how I’m doing”. The Buddha calls this “the flood of conceiving”.

The good news is that we can learn to stabilize awareness in a way that is disentangled from this constant need to conceptualize and grasp or resist. This learning has two sides:

- Learning to trust in the deeper currents of being and knowing. There are potentials, intelligences, ways of perceiving, appropriate motives for action, that involve much less stress and suffering than our more superficial and thought-based attempts to figure out and control every moment. Wisdom involves getting out of the way to allow these deeper currents to carry us.

Ojibwa saying: *“Sometimes I go about pitying myself, but all the while great winds carry me across the sky.”*

- Seeing more and more deeply how sensory/mental experience is moment by moment arising and passing, ungraspable, already over by the time we try to grab it, push it away or conceptualize it. Something in our deeper functioning gradually gets it: there is only more *dukkha* (“rope burn” as one teacher called it) in grasping at it, and only peace and ease in letting go into this “unentangled knowing” as a Thai teacher calls it.

“Form is like a glob of foam;

feeling, like a bubble;

perception, like a mirage;

mental fabrications, like a banana tree;*

consciousness, like a magic trick.” The Buddha SN2.95

*(*these are coreless, the trunk is just wrapped leaves)*

Balancing these two aspects of practice is important, we need to develop trust and mental stability to be able to truly let go in a way that is wise and beneficial. Here is some excerpts from a paper Gil wrote on this topic of balance:

The three core insights of mindfulness practice are impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. Because of their importance, these “three characteristics” are often taught enthusiastically without reference to **the mental development necessary to support them**. Sometimes this leads to an excessively intellectual understanding where the “insights” become merely learned concepts rather than something directly understood or seen.

Overemphasizing the three characteristics can make Buddhist practice dreary, even discouraging. For someone whose life is falling apart because of radical social or personal change, being told that everything is impermanent can be disheartening or worse. For someone whose life is filled with unrelenting suffering, learning that all is unsatisfactory takes away all hope. And for someone whose confidence and self-identity has been stripped away or was never developed, the not-self teaching can put salt in a deep wound.

The insights are best supported by a variety of inner strengths. If we don’t already have these, it is useful to cultivate them. Paradoxically, the three strengths most needed are opposite in character from the three insights. The power of mental stability enables greater insight into impermanence; the potency of well-being provides the healthy context for insight into unsatisfactoriness; and the strength of confidence keeps us balanced when we are faced with the insight into not-self. [...]

Mental stability is related to calm, constancy, continuity, and commitment in practice. Deep, direct insight into impermanence cannot arise in an agitated, restless mind where a preoccupation with ideas, imaginings, or memories interferes with seeing clearly. In order to perceive change it helps for the mind to be still; inner stability allows peace in the midst of change. It keeps us from being easily buffeted in times of great social and personal instability. [...]

The path of insight and liberation does not leave us with nothing; it leaves us with the well-developed inner treasures of a steady, happy, and confident mind. When we see that this mind is, like everything else, impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self, it only adds to our peace and happiness.

Reflection: Sit quietly and read through the below reflections, based on the story of the Four Heavenly Messengers. How might some of your priorities, or ways you spend your time, or approaches to seeking happiness and security change if you let these reflections sink in? Before and after you do this, please re-read Gil’s last paragraph above, and bear in mind that the Fourth Messenger was a contemplative walking in peace in the midst of all this.

I am of the nature to grow old.
There is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill-health.
There is no way to escape having ill health.

I am of the nature to die.
There is no way to escape death.