

Paññā (1 of 5) The Wisdom Arising from Suffering

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For this week, starting today, I'll be talking about the fifth of the five faculties – the faculty of wisdom. The Buddhist word in Pali for wisdom is *paññā*. It can be translated in different ways. Sometimes it's translated as 'discernment.' Sometimes I've rendered it as 'insight.'

The advantage of words like discernment and insight, is that they suggest the idea of an understanding, a seeing, that happens in the situations we're in. Wisdom can imply that we've learned some knowledge, some understanding of how things work. And we bring that along with us in our life, and apply it or are ready to use it with this pre-existing learning. That's valuable and important. But we also have the capacity to see, to have a certain presence and attention in the present moment – to have a wisdom faculty operating, where we discern; we see deeply into experience. So the truth of it gets revealed and understood in the moment, as it is. It's obvious – that's how it works. That's how it is.

The wisdom faculty is a capacity we all have, meaning it's just a natural functioning of our inner life. We all have this faculty. The word wisdom can seem somewhat lofty, and for some of us it may seem beyond reach because only great, wise people have wisdom. But the practice shows us that as we settle in and listen deeply, as we have the capacity for real attention to what's going on, listening deeply to ourselves, deeply to the world – our psychophysical system will begin to discern what's happening. We'll begin to see more and more clearly what is happening so that we can respond wisely in ways that are useful and supportive for us. This use, the application or the maturing of the wisdom faculty happens gradually over time. There's progress in the cultivation, development, and ripening of wisdom as we do this practice.

For many people, the first form of this wisdom is the wisdom that arises in the forge of suffering – in the great difficulties and challenges of our lives. It's been said in the ancient Buddhist teachings, that everyone comes to Buddhist practice through suffering, when somehow things don't seem quite right. Something is uncomfortable. Something seems off. Something really hurts. It's challenging, overwhelming, difficult. Sometimes the suffering that brings us to practice is when nothing else works. Everything else we've tried has not really helped us with the issues of our life.

I had the experience of reaching rock bottom. All my attempts to find a way out of my suffering didn't work. So finally I tried just letting go, but even that didn't work. And finally, at rock bottom, I guess I let go in a fuller way than when I first tried letting go. Basically, I just kind of gave up. And only then did the practice really arise in me – not because I applied myself, or understood what to do – but rather giving up in this very radical way tapped into a simplicity of being that wasn't my intention. I wasn't trying to do anything anymore, or be anybody, accomplish something, or defend myself. Just being in that space opened up a new possibility. And that new possibility inspired me greatly in doing the practice.

I could give you a whole autobiography of all the different ways I've suffered. And for each of us, it would probably make an interesting story, "The Autobiography of My Suffering." Hopefully, the way that autobiography works in Buddhism would be seeing how the autobiography of my suffering led me into the practice – how it really inspired

me to engage in a path that's meant to bring us to the other side of suffering – to bring not just relief from suffering, but a full, deep release from it.

The vehicle for doing that has a lot to do with our own capacity to see, to listen, to be mindful, and to be present for our experience. It's not easy. But it's a lot easier if we begin with faith (the first of the five faculties) – faith that when we're listening deeply, when we're present deeply, our whole psychophysical system does know the way towards healing. It knows the way to resolve things. It knows the path to release – the path to healing what ails us, given the challenges we have.

It's a remarkable journey to step away from the story-making person that we often are. Many times we're in the story-making mind. That mind is very small. Sometimes it works well. It creates wonderful stories that are opening and freeing – but it's a very limited part of who we are. And sometimes it's too limited to really help us work through some of the great difficulties we have. Certainly stories, ideas and memories are important. We can appreciate them. But then we go beyond the stories, and quiet the mind enough so that we can open up, and really feel and be present, and sense what's here.

If what we feel is suffering, then the wisdom faculty is the discernment that says, "I'm going to learn in a different way. I'm going to find a different way to live this life," and then to have faith that this is possible. There is a practice to be done. And we see that the faculties of wisdom and faith are mutually supportive of each other. There's discernment, and the seeing possibility. We don't really know the outcome. We don't yet really have an experience for ourselves. But we have faith in the possibility – the discernment and insight that says, "Yes, this is my suffering." We listen to it, rather than cowering from it, or seeing it as hopeless. We have the courage. Or we have kindness and compassion for ourselves. We hold our suffering with faith, wisdom, compassion, and a sense of possibility.

One function of this initiating faith and initiating wisdom is that they teach us, "Yes, it's time to be present. This is the time to hold all this in attention, to listen deeply, to be present for our experience." This prepares us for how we find ourselves beyond that, and the practice keeps unfolding beyond this initial moment of discernment, insight, wisdom, and inspiration. "Yes, I'm suffering, no doubt. It's okay to open widely, to make space for it, hold it in the body just long enough so that I can be inspired. Yes, I'm going to practice."

And then part of the next step of wisdom is to have discernment of what the wise way is to be with our challenges and our suffering. Not only to open to it and feel it – which can be overwhelming sometimes – but to have some wisdom and understanding of how to see the different options, how to be present for what is difficult, or how to be inspired, and how to take the next step with our suffering, how to practice with it. That would be the second form of wisdom, which we'll talk about tomorrow.

But for today, I basically had two things in mind. One was to talk to you about the initiating wisdom. That has a lot to do with seeing suffering, and being inspired by our faith that there is an alternative: a possibility of freedom from suffering, release from suffering. That was one thing I was hoping to convey.

The other was to be inspired to have faith in that possibility. Then we have a kind of ballast, strength, settledness, or rootedness, knowing that this is a good thing to do, and that we can do it. That, I think, is why the wisdom faculty follows the first four faculties. With just enough faith, courageous engagement, mindful listening, and unification, being gathered together – this brings all of ourselves to the table of practice. Then we'll find our way with our suffering.

So, whatever personal challenges you have, whatever suffering exists in this world, may it be the forge, the seedbed, for the arising of both your wisdom and your faith.

We'll continue tomorrow. Thank you very, very much.