



Buddhism Level 2

The Five Spiritual Faculties

Week 3 - Wisdom



Last week we looked at faith. We described it as having an emotional emphasis and providing us with a provisional acceptance of something that we have not yet experienced directly, but which has been described by somebody in whom we have trust. In the Buddhist context that 'something' may be regarded as the true nature of things, far beyond our everyday experience that is heavily influenced by complex **conditions**. The person in whom we place our trust may be a teacher of the Dharma – of whom the ultimate example is, of course, the Buddha.

We now turn our attention to the spiritual faculty that is traditionally the counter-balance of Faith – Wisdom. If we relate to reality emotionally through faith, wisdom appeals to our intellectual or rational understanding of that same reality. If our relationship to reality is primarily emotional, it is this faculty that we might want to develop. So what are the characteristics of wisdom? This sounds like a big question!

Back on the Introduction to Buddhism course, you may remember that we talked about the Threefold Path as a model to describe our spiritual development. The 3 components of the path are (1) Ethics (*sila* in Sanskrit), (2) Meditation (*samadhi*) and (3) Wisdom (*prajna*). This gives us a context for the place of wisdom in our spiritual practice. Sangharakshita tells us that we can only practice meditation effectively when our ethical foundation is firm; similarly, a well-established meditation practice will allow us to develop spiritual wisdom.

Any attempt to describe wisdom in words is obviously bound to be crude and very incomplete. However, one working model is that wisdom involves grasping the truths of (a) the **conditioned** world, in which we normally live, and (b) the **Unconditioned**, which is the ultimate state of things which transcends the conditioned; in other words, true Reality. According to Buddhism, everything in conditioned existence, in other words everything within our normal experience, has three unavoidable characteristics. Firstly, they are **unsatisfactory** – intrinsically flawed and unable to satisfy in the long term. Secondly, they are **impermanent** – they exist only temporarily. Thirdly, they are **without any enduring identity**. These truths are obviously closely inter-linked, and are just as true of the things we love (and even of our selves) as they are of mundane objects – our homes, possessions and gadgets being good examples of the latter. With wisdom, we can appreciate the impact of this teaching more and more fully as we contemplate it.

What then, can we say about the Unconditioned, which tradition tells us the Buddha experienced at the point of his Enlightenment? Again, it is important

to stress that a definition in words cannot do justice to the concept, but we can again try to grasp a very provisional model. This says that, when we see through and beyond the conditioned (i.e. when we gain transcendental wisdom), we realise that what remains is '**Emptiness**' (*sunyata*). By this we certainly *don't* mean that nothing exists – to believe this is probably not psychologically helpful, as we obviously spend most of our time inhabiting a world that, for all practical purposes, is clearly real enough! The concept of Emptiness has more to do with Reality being '**non-dual**', instead of being defined with reference to something else – in other words, conditionally. This is how we normally think of things – large or small, alive or dead, male or female, hot or cold, natural or unnatural. This view of the world is an 'internal' one, made up of the **concepts** that we use to try to build a meaningful model of what we perceive. If we could see through these artificial 'dualities' we could also see through this provisional (i.e. conditional) view of existence. Most importantly, we could see through the strongest duality of all – that of 'self' and 'other'. If we can stop seeing the world as, on the one hand, those things which we identify as 'I', 'me' and 'mine', and on the other hand people and things which are external to us, we take on a very different role in relation to the universe!

According to Buddhist tradition, wisdom is of three kinds:

1. Wisdom derived from **hearing** (including reading) – this is what, hopefully, coming to this class initially gives you! At this stage, your understanding is simply borrowed from someone else who is claiming to know more than you do.
2. Wisdom derived from **thinking** – this involves you reflecting *for yourself* on what you've taken in by hearing or reading and working out its deeper implications for yourself. Most of us tend to develop this sort of wisdom relatively rarely.
3. Wisdom derived from **meditation** – this involves experiencing 'higher states' of consciousness for ourselves. This definitely doesn't mean an intellectual understanding; rather, it's to do with realisation and intuition.

Whilst the first two of these kinds of wisdom are obviously needed, it's important that we don't assume that they are *all* that we need. They represent, as Sangharakshita says (in 'What is the Dharma?') "...the whole intellectual or doctrinal side of Buddhism". If we're not careful we can find our practice relying too heavily on them, and so reducing our understanding to a dry, almost academic level. It's for just this reason that it's very important that wisdom is counter-balanced by its 'opposite' spiritual faculty – faith.

Perhaps the most complete guidance on wisdom in the Buddha's teaching comes from the 'Perfection of Wisdom' texts in the Mahayana tradition. Some are very lengthy, others short and poetic. An important example of the latter, usually known as the **Heart Sutra**, examines the way that our minds perceive the conditioned world in terms of 5 different groups of concepts (forms, feelings, interpretations, habitual tendencies and consciousness of oneself). The sutra makes it very clear that each of these is 'empty', in the sense that they all come together within our minds to form a crude model of what lies well beyond all such models – Reality itself.