

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 ‘somebody’ 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 ‘Buddhism – Foundation’ course, you may have encountered the **Threefold Path** as a model to describe our spiritual development. The 3 components of the path are (1) ethics (*śīla* in Sanskrit), (2) meditation (*samādhi*) and (3) wisdom (*prajñā*). 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 define 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, which we normally perceive, and (b) the **Unconditioned**, which is the ultimate state of things which is independent of our perceptions; in other words, true Reality. According to Buddhism, everything in conditioned existence, in other words everything within our normal experience, has three unavoidable limitations. 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 **insubstantial** – meaning that 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 reflect on it.

What then, can we say about the Unconditioned, which tradition tells us the Buddha experienced at the point of his Awakening? Again, it is important to stress that a definition in words can’t possibly do justice to the question, 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 true or 'transcendental' wisdom), we realise that what remains is '**Emptiness**' (*śūnyatā*). 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 (maybe better translated as '**Openness**') has more to do with Reality being '**non-dual**', in other words not defined with reference to something else. This is how we normally think of things – large or small, alive or dead, male or female, good or bad, natural or unnatural. This view of the world is, in everyday terms, necessary, in that we use such 'dualities' to try to build a meaningful model of what we perceive. If we could see through these artificial distinctions 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 could stop seeing the world as, on the one hand, a central self, and on the other hand people and things which surround us, we should have a very different relationship with the universe!

According to Buddhist tradition, wisdom is of three kinds:

1. Wisdom derived from **hearing** (including, of course, 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* 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 *directly experiencing* 'higher states' of awareness for ourselves. This definitely doesn't mean an intellectual understanding; rather, it's to do with direct realisation.

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 rely too heavily on them, and so reduce 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 *Mahāyāna* 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 five different groups of concepts (forms, feelings, interpretations, habitual tendencies and consciousness of oneself). The *sutra* (meaning 'discourse') makes it very clear that each of these is 'empty', in the sense that they all come together within our minds to form a necessary, yet crude and provisional, model of what actually lies well beyond all such models – in other words, Reality itself.