

Over the last five weeks we've been looking at the traditional perfections of the *bodhisattva*: generosity, ethics, forbearance, energy in pursuit of the good and meditative concentration. We now turn to the last and, in many ways, the greatest of the perfections: wisdom.

Back on the 'Buddhism – Foundation' course, you may have encountered the **Threefold Path** as a model to describe our spiritual development. The three components of the path are (1) ethics, (2) meditation and (3) wisdom. This gives us a context for the place of wisdom in our spiritual practice. This model tells us that we can only practice meditation effectively when our ethical foundation is firm; similarly, a well-established meditation practice will help us to develop spiritual wisdom. We'll explore just how this works shortly.

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.

We can also perhaps grasp wisdom, at a personal level, in terms of how we might see the world if we were free of delusion. We're probably deluded about all sorts of things, but the most powerful delusion to which we're victim is our limited, narrow, self-obsessed view, in which we almost think that we're at the centre of the universe, and the rest of it revolves around us. This notion is, of course, preposterous, and yet we quite easily subscribe to it – can you recognise this sort of delusion in yourself? Delusion is, of course, one of the 'three poisons' that lie at the root of our suffering. We could also think of wisdom as something that would arise if we were rid of all three – not just delusion, but craving and aversion as well. As the three poisons are removed or destroyed, they are replaced by wisdom – and also by compassion as its inevitable companion.

If we were finally rid of craving, aversion and delusion, we would consequently experience the Unconditioned – but what would that be like? 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, we realise that what remains is '**Emptiness**' (*suññatā* in Sanskrit). By this we certainly *don't* mean that nothing exists –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. We normally think of things in terms of 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, our relationship with wisdom has three levels:

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.

It's worth saying a little more about how we can reflect on an idea, as part of the second 'level' of wisdom that's outlined above. Reflection is a technique, and a discipline, in its own right. It doesn't involve taking in information at a rational, intellectual level (this amounts to wisdom derived from hearing), yet it isn't meditation (i.e. the third 'level') as such. In reflection we introduce an idea that we've heard into a still, meditative state of mind, and let it rest there, being open to whatever it might lead to. Through this approach, we can allow that idea to sink more deeply into our experience, and relate to it more deeply than when we simply heard it.

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 different groups of concepts. The *sutra* (meaning 'discourse') makes it very clear that all of these concepts, including those normally used by Buddhism itself, are 'empty' (perhaps we could say 'provisional'). Reality itself is beyond, and completely non-dependent upon, any of our convenient concepts.