

## *Practical Wisdom*

*July 27, 2005*

People in different cultures all of the world comment that as you're about to die, your life passes before your eyes. And it's not so much the things that other people have done that pass before your eyes, it's what *you've* done, or cases where you should've done something but didn't do it. That's what hits the hardest, which is the opposite our normal everyday concerns. We tend to focus on what other people do, what they say, or what they might do to us or say about us. That can consume us, to the point where we tend to forget to look at what *we're* doing.

This is a typical pattern in the human mind: to focus on things that you're not responsible for and to forget the things that you *are* responsible for. If you remember that your life is shaped by your intentions, then you should also remember that the shape of your life is something you can determine for yourself, by looking after the quality of your intentions. When you start worrying about the future, you can remind yourself that as long as you have the mental qualities you need to ensure that your intentions are skillful, then you're going to be okay, no matter what.

This is how you invest in the future. This is how you prepare for the future, by developing good qualities of mind, and trying to make sure that they're as good as possible, no matter what the circumstances.

This is one of the reasons why we develop alertness, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, and how we learn to be persistent and ardent in developing these qualities of heart and mind. That's because these are the qualities that guarantee the quality of your intentions.

There's a teaching in the commentaries about the cycle of action. First comes the intention and then the result, either pleasure or pain, and then the result tends to be followed by defilement. When there's pleasure, you want to hold on to it and do what you can to maintain it. When there's pain, you want to push it away. So greed, anger, and delusion arise around the pleasure and pain, and then the greed, anger, and delusion have an impact on your subsequent actions, your subsequent intentions. This keeps the cycle going around and around in directions that tend to lead to suffering. The greater the defilement, then the greater the suffering—because when your mind is clouded, it's hard to make the right decision about what to do. Often the decisions go underground. That's the main thing that we're deluded about.

So you want to learn how to bring as much mindfulness and alertness to the cycle as you can. Now, you can't cut the cycle between the action and its result, but you *can* cut it between the result and the defilement. At the very least, you want to control it between the defilement and the action. In other words, when you know that there's greed, anger, or delusion in the mind, you can make up your mind not to follow them. That requires mindfulness, it requires alertness. Even better, when the pleasure or the pain arises, is when you can just be right there with the pleasure or the pain and not give rise to craving, not give rise to greed or anger around it, not give rise to delusion around it. Again, this requires mindfulness; it requires alertness.

On top of that, it requires a very practical kind of wisdom and discernment. Say that a really strong emotion arises in your mind, and part of you would really like to act on it, but another part knows that if you act on it, there's going to be trouble. An important part of wisdom is learning how to effectively say No to yourself in cases like that. And because of the greed or the anger or the delusion or the fear or the passion or whatever, there will be things that you know would give rise to good results but you don't want do them. You have to learn how to figure out how to talk yourself into doing them in the midst of the anger, in the midst of the whatever the defilement of the mind.

So wisdom lies not so much in being able to describe emptiness or to understand really abstruse teachings, it lies in knowing how to deal with cause and effect in an intelligent way, in the midst of your defilements, so that you can learn how to say No to them. Sometimes this means learning how to cajole yourself; sometimes it means learning how to be strict with yourself. It's like dealing with a child. The wise parent knows when to be strict with a kid, when to give it a little extra room, when to be encouraging, when to send it up to its bedroom without any food. Wisdom means being able to sense the signs that tell you what to do in any particular circumstance, to get around the fact that there's greed or anger in your mind.

This is why it's good to associate with people have learned to gain some control over their anger. They provide good examples. And this is why meditation is such an important part, not only of the practice while you're sitting here with your eyes closed in the monastery, but also of whatever you're doing wherever you are: learning how to stick with the breath, how to keep the mind in a comfortable place. That right there is a large part of the battle. If anger comes and you feel you just can't stand it, that you have to get it out of your system, that's a sign you've lost touch with the breath. You haven't been on good terms with the breath.

You've forgotten how to use the breath to disperse the physical symptoms of the anger.

The same is true with lust. If you can learn how to breathe through the feelings, the physical manifestations in the body—relaxing your hands, relaxing the feet—*you* can start occupying the body instead of having that particular feeling occupying the body. Then you're in a better position to be able to sidestep it, to figure out where its weak point are, so that you can focus on the weak points of the anger or lust or the greed or whatever, and work your way around it.

In particular, you can work around the message it's constantly sending you: "You'll have to give into me at some point, so you'd do better to give in now." Question that. Those thoughts are pretty much the way of the world: "This is the way we're doing things now, so you'd better accept, it, you'd better give in. You'll have to give in someplace along the line, so you might as well give in now." Just keep questioning that. Say, "Well, maybe I'll give in five minutes or ten minutes from now, but I don't want to give in now. For the time being, I'm going to stick with what I know is right, what I know is going to be skillful." And often you'll find in five or ten minutes that the greed or the anger has lost its power. You've weathered the storm.

Another one of its messages is, "I'm going to come back at some point, so you won't get rid of me until you give in to me." Again, you say, "Maybe I'll give in when you come back and but not right now." And remind yourself that giving in to your defilements doesn't get rid of them. It strengthens them. Meanwhile, do your best to make the body a comfortable place to stay. That right there gives you a lot of energy. In other words, learn how to use what you've got here in the present moment in terms of the breath, your perceptions, your ability to analyze what's going on. Learn how to use these things as your allies, rather than allowing your defilements to take them over.

This is one of the ways in which meditation shows its real benefits. It's helpful in the battle of getting yourself to do what you know you should do because it's going to give good results, or to abstain from things you know are going to lead to bad results. All too often we think of wisdom as being very refined, something about emptiness or not-self or other very abstract things. Well, emptiness and not-self show their value when they're useful in this problem right here. You look at the defilement and you see that it's empty of self. You look at the state of the mind when the defilement passes away: It's empty of suffering, empty of stress. You learn to appreciate that fact. That's when emptiness becomes a useful tool. The same with not-self: You look at the defilement and it's not yours. It may claim

to be yours, but you don't have to believe that claim. Ask to see the receipt where you bought it. And it doesn't have a receipt to show.

Or as Ajaan Lee says in his talk on consciousnesses, when a particular idea comes in your mind and you know it's going to be for your own good, you can side with that kind of thought. But if you know it's going to be harmful down the line, just assume that maybe it's somebody else's thought. Maybe it's a thought from the parasites in your blood or the worms in your stomach. In other words, just because a thought comes into the mind and begins to take over the body doesn't mean that you have to sign on to it. That's a way of using the teaching on not-self in the real work of wisdom, which is to figure out how to do the things you may not want to do but you know are going to be beneficial, or to abstain from the things that you like to do but you know are going to be harmful. That's where wisdom really counts.

As for what other people do, that's their business. That's their karma. Your responsibility is what you do. It's important that you keep that point always in mind.