

Paññā (2 of 5) Distinguishing Wisdom

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This will be the second talk on the faculty of wisdom – *paññā*. It is part of the field of wisdom to be motivated to understand, to be inspired, or to have no other choice but to engage in the practice of becoming free of suffering. Suffering, in one way or the other, is the fire from which practice, and the interest in mindfulness, concentration, and being present arises.

As we begin to practice and are more mindful, a very important function of wisdom is that we start making distinctions. There is distinguishing wisdom. This is not sophisticated wisdom. Rather, it arises out of our clarity of mind where we're able to see more than the big, buzzing, confused events of the moment. We start seeing clearly the different elements that make it up.

For example, I'm sitting, practicing, or just being – and I feel terrible. I guess it's terrible that I'm feeling terrible, but 'terrible' is a vague category. But it points to something. As I settle, get a little bit quieter, and start paying attention to what's going on, I can start distinguishing that part of this feeling involves physical experiences – perhaps of contraction and tension. Another part involves certain kinds of thinking. Sometimes certain emotions are present. To be able to tease apart and distinguish between the different component parts of feeling terrible gives me a handle on the experience. It gives me something to be more attentive to – and to find some freedom in relationship to feeling terrible.

It's a little hard to even know what the concept of terrible means, where to start, and how to relate to it as an experience. But as the mind's capacity to see clearly develops, we start distinguishing. If I can see that part of my terribleness is tension in the body, then I have the opportunity to bring careful attention to that tension. Maybe I notice there's tension in the shoulders, so I relax my shoulders. Then the gestalt of my whole terrible feeling begins to shift and quiet down a little bit.

Maybe I notice that I'm feeling really sad. Earlier, I hadn't really noticed that I was sad. But when I really see, "Oh, this is sadness," something releases. "Oh yes, that's what it is." I'm not pulling away unconsciously from the discomfort of the sadness. In recognizing it, I say, "Oh, more settling – that's what's happening." Then this gestalt that I call 'terrible' starts to begin to change.

Perhaps I notice that I'm thinking about some of the comments you wrote here about background noise. So I'm having thoughts about background noise. What should I do? What should I say? I say, "Oh, that's the thought I have. I'll just explain it." Probably what you heard today was the garbage collection on our street. If it was intermittent, the sound you heard was the garbage trucks. It was quite loud. There was more banging of garbage cans today than I've ever heard. I don't know if that was the issue, but we'll find out. I'll look into it.

I see the thoughts, and so the thoughts quiet down. Slowly, by making distinctions, I also start being able to see that I have some choices. The greater the distinctions we make about what's going on, the more choices we have about how we relate to our experiences. This idea of how we relate to our experience is also part of this distinguishing quality of wisdom.

There are always two broad categories of things happening. There is what's happening, and how we relate to that experience. There might be something uncomfortable happening, and in relationship to that discomfort, there might be fear. There might be blame. There might be anger and irritation. There might be distress. There might be judgments and ideas about the experience. This means that. The experience and the relationship to it are two separate things. We might not be able to change the experience, but we may have some choice with

how we relate to it, and what we think and feel about it. Maybe we could be less judgmental. Maybe we don't have to be so afraid, glued to it, attacking it, or entangled with it.

There's being able to see an experience – and then there are ideas about that experience. Some of those ideas might be true, and some might be not be. But we see, "Here's the experience, and here's my idea. Here's a person I'm seeing, and here are my ideas about that person." It turns out that this person looks like one of my elementary school teachers who was really scary. The reason I feel afraid of this person might be because of the association with my elementary school teacher.

On the one hand, there's my whole inner experience of association, and there's this person I'm seeing. By making that distinction, I have some choice. I can see that there's really nothing scary about this person. I can choose to look at the person more carefully, or I can look at myself more carefully.

In practice, the ability to make distinctions and then choices is a very important part of the wisdom factor. The heart of this distinguishing wisdom is to be able to distinguish between that which is healthy and that which is unhealthy. In Buddhist language, it's that which is skillful or unskillful, wholesome or unwholesome, helpful or not helpful. With our ability to make distinctions, we become our own teachers.

I can see that my preoccupation, judgments, and fear around the person who looks like my elementary school teacher is not necessarily accurate about the person I'm with. And it is not so healthy, skillful, or helpful. Now I can choose to do something skillful. I can be careful about what I say, about what I think, or how I relate to my view of this person.

We sit in meditation, and we start making distinctions. It's not that we're actively analyzing or trying to figure it all out. But as the mind gets quieter, we see more clearly what's here. It is a natural functioning of the mind to be able to make distinctions. It will see more clearly, "Oh, there's this, and there's that."

At some point, as I settle, it's really clear that if I keep thinking repeatedly about all my anger at the fact that someone left a little bit of trash on the sidewalk outside of IMC, and I find myself getting more and more irritated, maybe that's not a skillful, helpful train of thought when I'm meditating. Maybe the skillful thing to do is to acknowledge my irritation and concern that there's a need to keep the place clean and cared for during this shelter-at-home time. Now that I've acknowledged this, maybe the skillful thing to do is to settle in – to feel and breathe with the tension that I'm feeling because of thinking about the trash. So I sit there, and that's skillful. That's a good thing to do. I'm not denying it. I'm not criticizing being this way, but I'm finding a skillful, helpful way to be with it.

It seems like there's a natural capacity for distinguishing wisdom – independent of doing a lot of analysis or thinking. Maybe we use this natural capacity sometimes.

But this wonderful capacity to distinguish also relates to *how* we do the distinguishing. If we keep seeing distinctions, and this makes us tense and agitated, then it's not so skillful. Maybe we need to find a calmer way to do it. Or wait, if this is not the time to do it. That'll come later. Or maybe, very gently, we can find a way to make distinctions that helps us become more settled, calm, and quiet.

I'll end with this. One possible distinction is to distinguish between different ways of thinking, tones of voice in which to think, speeds in which to think, or images that help us settle if we think a lot with images. So, rather than being either-or with thinking, it's possible to begin thinking in wiser, more supportive ways for meditation. We make distinctions between ways in which we think.

If we can choose ways that help us to be more settled, more clear, and this clarity helps support further distinctions, then we're riding on and being supported by our capacity for wisdom.

Because distinguishing wisdom can seem to be intellectual, remember that we're talking about a form of wisdom that really follows on the foundation of the body and being grounded – and on our faith, energy, mindfulness, and concentration. So don't be in a hurry to do distinguishing wisdom. Just use what's available and what is supportive for you.

May distinguishing wisdom support you and all beings. Thank you very much.