

Wisdom / Discernment

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These weeks that I am speaking, these last few weeks, the subject has been the five faculties. That's the most common translation. *Indriya* is what's called in India, and these are very important factors of meditation. They're very important faculties or capacities we have. When I was practicing meditation in Thailand, I was told that traditional Vipassanā teachers in Tibet, when they are listening to students give their experience, the teachers are listening through the perspective of these five faculties or capacities the students have, to see which of these needs to be strengthened, or which needs to come into balance, or how to work with these five. The five which we're going through are: confidence, sometimes called faith (but I think confidence is a better translation); effort or energy or engagement, which is number two; the third one is mindfulness; the fourth one is concentration; and then today we'll talk about what's usually called wisdom.

The word for faculties, the five faculties, comes from the name *Indra*, which is one of the chief gods of the Indian pantheon in the time of the Buddha, like the god who controls. Back then, at least, things change in their disguise, but back then, it was one of the chief controlling gods in charge of the heavens, I guess. So they had a certain kind of power or control over things. Some people will translate these five faculties as the five controlling faculties, the five things which control the spiritual life or control meditation. It might be an unfortunate translation into English because we have such a strong association with control freaks, and so a system of control might not be the best. But if you think of the number of things which control the car that you're driving—certainly the driver controls it, the engine controls it, the transmission system controls it—various things can control how the car is driving.

Speed controls it. All kinds of things come into play, and you can adjust the different parts of a car to a certain degree in order to control better, get more control or less control of the car. So it's also said that these five faculties, when cultivated in meditation, developed or strengthened, can be developed to the point where they become not just faculties or capacities or potentials, but they become powers that we have, powers we carry with us. So they become like strengths that we have here with us, rather than something we potentially have that we develop now. They're developed, so they become strengths. And it's said that these

five faculties can control a lot of different things.

But one of the things they control is their opposites. When you develop these strengths and capacities, the opposites won't either. The opposite of confidence is doubt. So if you have a lot of doubt, then what needs to be developed is confidence, and confidence will push aside or not make it possible to have doubt there. If a person is sluggish or lazy or lethargic, then the energy factor is the medicine for sloth or laziness, to rouse the energy, to arouse oneself in practice. When we are roused properly, with strong vitality and engagement in a spiritual life, then sloth is not going to be part of it.

Mindfulness is the medicine for what's usually translated into English as heedlessness. I know of no English situation where we use the word heedlessness except in Buddhist texts. I guess they used to talk more about it anyway. Any of you use the word heedless in your daily life? Yes, some of you, but you know what it means, right? So to be careless or to be negligent, to be careful. Concentration is the medicine for a scattered, agitated, restless mind. So if there's a lot of agitation, then we develop concentration, and then wisdom is the medicine for ignorance, for not knowing.

The word for wisdom in the five faculties is in Pāli *paññā*, and some of you might know it better in the Sanskrit version, which is *prajñā*. It's most commonly translated into English as wisdom, which probably is fine in many situations, though I prefer in these five faculties to translate it as discernment. It's fairly common for translating Buddhist words into English to need to use different translations in different situations, like the word *dhamma*—there are like fifty-two meanings of the word *dhamma*, and so people will translate it differently depending on the context. So in the context of the five faculties, I prefer the word discernment over wisdom. Buddhism is often considered to be a wisdom tradition where the word wisdom is sometimes synonymous with truth, or reality as it is, or the ultimate reality, ultimate teaching.

Wisdom is a very powerful word in Buddhism, and sometimes Buddhism is called a wisdom tradition where wisdom and compassion are the key pillars or the wings that support the tradition itself or the practice itself. Wisdom is a great idea. I love the word wisdom. It's so evocative in my mind. There are so many different things that are wise, all different aspects to wisdom. I think that everybody will have a different angle on wisdom; different people develop a different kind of perspective on what is wise or different ideas.

As I came across this in the last few weeks, I thought this was very wise, that sheer, one-on-one piece of wisdom that someone came with. This is a book called *Novice to Master*, and

the subtitle is “An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity.” Now, is that really a wise statement, or is that a foolish statement? Anyway, this is Sōkō Morinaga, who is a very famous Zen master in Japan who died a few years ago, who was an abbot of some very famous monasteries in China. So it’s not any old fool.

If I were to sum up the past forty years of my life, the time since I became a monk, I would have to say that it has been an ongoing lesson in the extent of my own stupidity.

When I speak of my stupidity, I do not refer to something that is innate, but rather to the false impressions that have cleverly stockpiled layer upon layer in my imagination.

Whenever I travel to foreign countries to speak, I am invariably asked to focus on one central issue: just what is enlightenment?

This thing, enlightenment, however, is a state that one cannot understand only through experience.

They cannot be explained or grasped through words alone, through practice.

Zen training is not a matter of memorizing the wondrous, wonderful words found in the sūtras and in the records of ancient teachers.

Rather, these words must serve as an impetus to crush the false notions of one’s imagination.

The purpose of practice is not to increase knowledge, but to scrape the scales off the eyes, to pull the plugs out of the ears.

Through practice one comes to see reality.

And although it is said that no medicine can cure folly, whatever prompts one to realize I was a fool is in fact just such medicine.

So he kind of begins talking slightly about enlightenment, and what he offers is not a definition of what enlightenment is in a wonderful, wondrous way—all the glory of enlightenment—but rather says, as he matured, as he developed his practice, he became increasingly aware how foolish he is or was. Maybe that’s a flipside of enlightenment. Enlightenment is the clear seeing of our nature, of who we are, of a seeing of a possibility that shows us also how we have been living. It shows us the foolishness we’ve been living by, the delusions we’ve been living by, the unnecessary attachments and clings we’ve been living by, the unnecessary fears we’ve been living by and such. Really seeing something, and seeing what is not necessary, is scraping the scales from our eyes and seeing anew.

So that was one kind of version of wisdom, someone who understood something. Another little piece of wisdom that I like is, someone once said, they offer a wonderful question to

carry with you in your practice as you go about your life. Sometimes teachers will give one of their students one question, and have them carry that one question with them until maybe they die, but to carry that one question with them as their guide in their spiritual life. This one question that one person was given was, “What is left out?” What’s left out? Ask that over naturally.

What’s left out here? What’s being left out? Is my neighbour being left out? Are my feelings being left out? Is my environment being left out? What am I leaving out? What am I leaving out of awareness? What am I leaving out of my heart? What am I closed to? To hold that question over and over again and ask yourself that question is a wise question and can lead to wisdom if we really apply it in all kinds of situations in life, partly because many people find themselves closed, shut down or turned away or attached or stuck in some way. What’s being left out is a kind of question to open up into a wider sense of reality.

So Buddhism is a wisdom tradition, and wisdom is said to be acquired many different ways. Buddhism does not denigrate the kind of wisdom that can come from study, from teachings, from reading. In the old days, they called it wisdom that came from listening because they didn’t have books. There’s one form of wisdom: the wisdom that comes from reading and listening or learning from others. The second kind of wisdom is the wisdom that can come from thinking, reflecting about our lives, thinking about truth and reality of practice, and that also is not denied. It’s good to reflect and think and to contemplate.

Sometimes I am around people who’ve done Buddhist practice for some time, who have some idea that they’re not supposed to think, that thinking is somehow bad, and thinking is an enemy to spiritual life. But my own experience has been that thinking has been a very important part of my overall life as a human being, and I’m very grateful for my thinking. That’s gotten me certainly into plenty of trouble, but it’s also something that has been very valuable, so it’s gotten me out of trouble, too. Then the third kind of wisdom is the wisdom that comes from practice. This is kind of a hierarchy, so that wisdom that comes out of practice is considered to be the most profound and most important or the most transformative form of wisdom. This coming out of practice means that it’s coming out of your own experience, your own life, your own practice.

As the Buddha once said, “I can only point out the way, the path. You have to walk it.” There are certain things that other people cannot do for you. Some other people, this guy says here in this book, says other people can’t do for you certain things; certain things we have to do for ourselves. In that category of things is developing a deep spiritual wisdom. No one else

can do it for you in the depths of it. You have to do it for yourself. You have to practice and engage in some way yourself, and that's acquired through practice, through engagement.

When you come to the five faculties, then a certain form of wisdom is the wisdom that comes from discernment. Discernment here is much bigger than thinking about something or understanding things analytically. In fact, thinking about things in meditation can be a hindrance to meditation practice; analyzing what's going on in some analytical, contemplative, or cognitive way can get in the way, though it might have a very important place in other parts of one's life. In meditation, we don't want to investigate or be discerning in a thoughtful way if it makes the mind more agitated. So what is discernment, or what is wisdom, here in these five faculties? As a faculty, it's something that we all have.

It's something not only we all have, but it's operating all the time to a certain degree. What we are asked to do in meditation is to strengthen it or highlight or heighten our capacity for discernment. It's said in the Buddhist tradition sometimes that a mind which is liberated, or a mind which is—don't say it this way, but just state lightly—a mind that's in a natural state, that's not colored by greed, hate, delusion, or fear or attachment, that's not trying to gain anything or become anything or push anything away, a mind that is at rest deeply with itself, will also be involved in discernment, in the process of coming to wisdom, in cognition. Sometimes it's called the cognitive functioning of emptiness, and you can watch it. I see it in young children, very young children. Their minds are awake and alert, and they're discerning and understanding what's going on in life.

That's a kind of curiosity. I'm amazed at my one-and-a-half-year-old's fascination with tinker toys. There's a lot of discernment, a lot of engagement there. No one told him to do this. He is not being propelled by fear or anything. It just seems like a natural functioning of his mind. So in meditation, also, we want to allow the natural functioning of discernment to move through us, and not put it on hold, or not squash it or inhibit it.

One way of talking about this, I believe, is to say that we are supposed to bring our intelligence with us into meditation practice. Meditation practice is meant to use all your intelligence. Now, we know nowadays that we have lots of different kinds of intelligences. It doesn't mean that you have to be intelligent in some comparative way, like a 180 IQ or something. What it means is that whatever intelligence you have, we want to use it. We want to engage it for the purpose of developing the spiritual life, in developing the path of freedom and migration.

As I said, as intelligence faculties, it's the discernment faculty which attracts and gauges how things are going. It's the discernment factor that discerns or discriminates or sees differences

between what's going on. It's the discernment faculty that can notice, "Oh, right now I'm tense. It's possible not to be tense. This is what's useful to do in order to let go of my tension." It's the discernment faculty which will notice, "Oh, I think I'm straining. Mindfulness notices I'm straining in my practice." It's the discernment factor that says, "Oh, what would happen if I just relaxed my eyes, my jaw, and my shoulders a little bit?"

Maybe that would help and I wouldn't strain so much. It's a discerning factor that finds its way: how to make a correction, how to adjust what's going on. It's mindfulness that recognizes, "Oh, I am pretty linear in my effort here. I'm just kind of here meditating, but I'm not really here. I'm just letting my mind wander freely up and around and all over the universe." It goes, and on occasion I remember to bring it back, but mindfulness recognizes it. Not only that I'm not so present, but recognizes, "I'm not really putting much effort into this. I'm not really that serious. I think it's enough just to sit here, and something will happen by magic or whatever."

Then it's the discernment actor that says, "Oh, now that I've recognized that I'm being literal, what is a wiser way, more useful way to be present in my meditation? Do I need to arouse more energy and more effort? Do I need to apply myself more in what I'm doing here?" Maybe that's the case. But it isn't just simply asking, "Do I need to apply myself?" Discernment shows you how to apply yourself or suggests various ways to apply yourself. "What I need to do now is to sit up straighter."

"What I need to do now is to, as I heighten my mindfulness, try to be more mindful, more clearly mindful, moment by moment, of what's happening. Have more continuity of mindfulness, more strength of mindfulness in the moment right now." So discernment helps us find the way, sees the possibility of the way, sees the path in the forest, for example, or searches out the path in the forest. I believe to some degree this discernment is operating all the time. What we're asked to do in looking at these five faculties is how to use discernment in a way that strengthens or heightens or improves or develops our spiritual life.

For that, and for us, for the purpose of discernment, we need to know for what—what is the purpose? What is the goal that we want to be discerning? Wisdom is not just simply wisdom in the abstract, but there is a sense of a goal or a purpose or a direction that our life is about. If you have a sense of a goal, then you can talk about being discerning. What is discerning? What is helpful for finding that goal, for pursuing that goal? How do I find that? If I know I want to go to Los Angeles, then you can ask the question, "Which roads will take you there?"

But if you don't, if you know you want to go somewhere, but no one's told you where, then it's

really hard to find your way. So having some sense of where you're going is really necessary. That's part of the wisdom faculty. As you've already reflected and thought well about, have a really good sense of what you're doing and why you're doing it. The thing about this is that there are a lot of different things you could do that are wise. There are a lot of different spiritual teachings of what the goal of spiritual life is like, including wonderful spiritual teachings that say the goal is to have no goal.

But that's also to have some sense where the path is, where the path is found—in not having a goal. The path is found in not directing myself in any particular direction. But even that involves discernment: “Oh, and now, right now, I'm goal-oriented, and what I'm trying to practice is goalless practice. I'm not trying to make anything happen, but that's what my mind is trying to control. What's going on? Trying to manipulate.” Discernment and mindfulness see that, and discernment says, “OK, how do I correct for that? What do I have to do here? Do I have to do nothing and just see it? Just be mindful and be honest of what's going on?”

Or do I need to let go of something? Let me let go of my efforts, let go of my will, let go of the ideas I have of trying to improve myself, let go of the ideas I have of self, of me, the one who's doing this thing here. So there's a process of engagement with our life, with our practice, which is enlivening. Part of what I and all these five faculties is what enlivens the practice. We won't develop meditation to the point when we get absorbed in what we're doing. Getting absorbed in what we're doing is helpful if there's faith or confidence, if there's engagement, if there's mindfulness, if there's concentration, and if there is discerning, if there's questioning, if there's looking and wondering and exploring: “How is this? What's going on now?”

If you're really absorbed in this present moment experience, and you find it fascinating, you're not going to think about the future. You're not going to think about the past. So you're not going to plan your plan, your next day, or whatever you get caught up in. So discernment is one of those things. It helps us get absorbed in what's happening. One of the important aspects of discernment is that it's self-correcting.

What I mean by that is that when you hear that part of meditation practice is to be discerning, and to be looking and wondering, and kind of looking where, how, what to do now, and how to make a correction here, how you let go of this, and what's the right thing to do here, it can sound like there's a lot of doing in meditation practice. It can sound like there's a lot of efforting, a lot of technique, a lot of analysis, a lot of contemplation and thinking. It can give you a headache because most people are already so stressed out that what they need to do

when they sit and meditate is to do nothing for the first ten years, just to cool out. So it's very powerful to have a practice of don't doing. Just let go. Just be. Just be here.

Because we're so used to becoming and doing and getting and all these things, but it's discernment. Hopefully, discernment will tell you, "All right, now what I most need is not to listen to a talk on discernment, because that's just not what I need to hear, because what I need to hear is just relax." Discernment tells you, "Oh, what's happening now? My practice is analyzing and thinking too much. What's happening right now is too controlling in my situation. I think I'm in charge, and my controlling and thinking that I'm in charge is just getting in the way."

So using mindful discernment together, it becomes self-correcting. We feel the tension. We feel the way in which we get contracted or get agitated by how we're practising, and then we make a correction for that. We adjust for that for the purposes of becoming more peaceful, for the purposes of becoming more calm or more concentrated, more at ease or happier. If you have some sense of what is useful to develop in practice, then you can kind of sniff your way forward to what is helpful to get there. If you have a sense that developing peace and calm is really key to developing a meditative mind, then you use your discernment just to the extent that it helps you develop greater calm and peacefulness.

Part of the goal of meditation is to develop a very still mind, which is also very vital. The image that's used in the ancient texts is that of a candle flame, which is unflickering. It doesn't move, just completely still. But you know that the candle flame inside is very dynamic. It's very bright and alive in a sense. So the same way with a mind that's very still, it's also very alert. To use discernment to see, "How can I cultivate a mind which is stiller if I think too much? What I need to do now can be very still."

So how can I be discerning and still at the same time? How can I use that faculty of mind to lean into or feel my way into a place of greater stillness that's also not dull, but actually is quite keen or quite sharp? It's the role of mindfulness and discernment to know also when we should not be discerning at all. There come various points in practice where we should not even be involved in that activity of being discerning about what's going on, but actually just leave things alone in some radical, simple way. That's also an important place. But you use your intelligence to find that.

So discernment, making a distinction, seeing differences, and seeing which differences are helpful, which side of the differences are helpful, and then learning how to engage in what's helpful, or pick up what's helpful, or to let go of what's not helpful. There's a lot of things

that a wise life or practice will reveal. For example, a person might discover that their life is a lot saner, a lot calmer, if they meditate every day. So they do the work, the reflection to see, “What would it take to set up my life so that I can meditate every day?” That’s a function of discernment.

We’re discerning, we’re making a distinction between things—sanity and insanity—and we’re figuring out, “Oh, this is what I need to do to develop more sanity in my life, or more calm.” So we do those things, hopefully, and set things up in such a way that we can do it, and then we sit down to meditate, for example, and we find out that in meditating, the mind is just really, really agitated. You could just sit there and allow yourself to just be with the agitation. It might be useful. Sometimes I do that. I just be there with my thinking mind, my restless mind, and just being with it. I’m not doing anything with it, not pushing it away or fixing it or doing anything.

Sometimes it’s very wise for me, because it just settles by itself, and if you leave it alone, it quiets down. Other times, I don’t quiet down after a while. Or other times, I get a sense through my experience and my history of being with my mind, knowing it, or whatever, that the particular kind of agitation I have right now is really what it does. It requires some careful attention. It’s kind of like a friend is agitated who just needs to be able to have someone to talk to so they can really hear you. Sometimes the mind needs some very quality attention from yourself, and so I need to pay attention to this agitated mind.

What it’s like, the feelings behind it—maybe there’s fear or anxiety or irritation or anger or something which is kind of feeling, and keeps the agitation going. I need to listen really carefully. That’s what’s needed right now. Then discernment may say, “Oh, well, how do I listen to it? How do I be with it? Do I just listen to the thoughts and the quality of my thinking? Do I feel the emotion, or do I feel how it’s being manifested in my body, the physical aspects of being agitated?” So discernment finds our way with the agitation: where to put our attention, where’s the key, where’s a door that helps us really connect with what’s happening in a wise way.

Or I’m sitting in meditation, and I’m no longer agitated, and perhaps I’m sitting there, and the mind is beginning to get quite calm, and I find myself now with the mind just drifting off into pleasant thoughts, kind of daydreams, almost. It takes a while maybe to catch on to that, and after a while I catch on. I realize, “You know, I’m spending a lot of time just drifting off. My mind is just kind of daydreaming, and I could do this, but this is not particularly useful for me to have the mind drift so much.” Maybe what I need to do is to really bring a keen mindfulness

to the drifting mind, at least see clearly what it's like for the mind to be so lethargic, or so calm, just drifting around.

Or maybe what I need to do here is to try to just gently, very gently, as I don't want to lose the calm I have, but very gently try to arouse a keener sense of knowing what's happening in the present moment. Or maybe what I need to do is develop a little more emphasis or umph behind focusing on my breath, because I need to have more energy in developing greater concentration. I'm already calm, which is good. Let's see if I can use that calm to get absorbed in my concentration, get really developed into a more concentrated state, not just a calm state, and perhaps, you know, calm and concentrated and very present. Then I notice other things going on. I might notice, for example, how proud I am of my practice, my conceit.

"This is really great. I hope other people are noticing all this," and if I pay really honest attention to that thought of conceit, it's really unpleasant to have it. There's a certain kind of pleasure in knowing I'm the best meditator on my block. But that's a kind of superficial pleasure, because if I go underneath that pleasure, it's actually masking a greater sense of discomfort when I have that kind of thinking. So I'm making distinctions, again, between different aspects of what's going on, and I see, "Oh, I don't think it's so useful for me to be caught up in this conceit. I could just let it go rampant, or I could do something about it." One thing I could do about it is just be very mindful of it, so mindful of it that I'm not caught by it.

Another thing I can do with it is let go of it. I'll try to let go of it. "Look at that, I let go of it. So good." It's so tricky, you know, the mind, right? Then I might notice that slowly, after a long time, finally, this conceit or whatever can begin to dissipate a little bit, enough to see that, really, everything that I experience, everything that is happening to me, I'm always understanding through the perspective of the self—myself. "This is happening to me. I need to do something about it. I need to become a better person. It's a self-improvement project. I'm trying to make a better me. It's all about me in some way. I am the one who's making the practice. I'd better try more. I'd better be more discerning."

I think it's great. It was great when I was living in Japan learning Japanese a little bit, because I spoke Japanese like I speak English, and in Japanese they very seldom use a pronoun. If it's just implied, you know, you speak. So if I said, "You are going out the door," in the context, you understand I meant going out the door, but you don't say the "I." But I couldn't quite do that. So I was always starting sentences "watashi wa," which is the way you say "I." It became so weird to always be saying "I, I, I, I, I," because no one else said it hardly ever.

If I'd stayed in America, it wouldn't have seemed odd, because we say it a lot, and no one thinks twice about it, right? Which must make it statements. So you notice, "Oh, here's what's going on in this 'I-ing.' What would it be like if I don't do that? I let go of that." Or what will it be like if I discover that part of life, of my experience, that's independent from "I-ing"? There are various ways of doing that. One way, for example, is to notice it again, to bring mindfulness to the process of "I-ing." There's a lot of "I-ing" going on here. Everything's about me. I'm viewing, appending the perspective of me. Not exactly conceit, but everything's around me, my experience.

By now doing it, what is it like to just bring very keen mindfulness? You really see this, be very honest, and hold it in awareness for a while, this activity every time it arises. To hold it just that. A number of things might happen if you do that. One thing is it might relax and let go of, and you might find this wonderful thing of being present for reality without doing so through the thoughts or the ideas or the construction of a self that is experiencing things. That's a really sweet thing to experience. The other thing that might happen is you might discover that mindfulness or the awareness which is aware of the "I-ing" is not the same thing as the "I."

When you do so, what's that then? Then you can be discerning, see that difference between the awareness which doesn't seem to have any "I" in it, and the "I-ing" which seems to have a lot of "I" in it. What happens if I just kind of lean into that part of my experience where there's no "I," into that awareness where there doesn't seem to be any "I"? You can't even say an awareness that now you're aware, or anybody is aware. Just awareness kind of floating by itself. In a sense, what if you just rest there?

So what I was trying to paint here is a whole series of questions or explorations. That is part of what discernment does. Discernment is a very important aspect of human life, and a very important aspect of the spiritual life in the Buddhist tradition, and sometimes is called wisdom. Sometimes I call it discernment. What's going on, and it's something I think to be treasured, something to be really celebrated, enjoyed, as an aspect of human life. When it's used wisely, when discernment is used discerningly, and today's talk was mostly a celebration of it, or a kind of focusing and highlighting that aspect of our life.

Remember that the five faculties operate together. So even though the talk today was mostly about discernment, you have to remember that this is one fifth of these five faculties, which have to come into balance and work together. If you overemphasize discernment and underemphasize the other four, you'll get in trouble. But you need to have them all four kind of

working together. So there's the appropriate amount of calm or concentration, stability that goes together with the discerning, but there's clear mindfulness, clear seeing of what is actually going on. So the discerning doesn't get abstract or theoretical, or, you know, oh, and there has to be a certain amount of engagement, applying oneself.

Just as I can be very discerning, and I like to say it can be like reading the menu. I can have all these ideas of what's useful to do, but then it doesn't do anything about it. You have to order the food at some point, and discernment also needs to be together with confidence. The confidence part is that part that's also connected to faith, which makes discernment heartfelt, there's a heart, what we put our heart into, rather than just some kind of intellectual exercise we might think it is. Sometimes when we hear about wisdom or discernment, we all have the capacity of living more deeply peaceful lives, living lives which are liberated, connected to compassion. We all have the capacity of living lives which are sane, and the purpose of Buddhist practice is to become sane.

I hope it all happens to you soon, to all of us. So excuse me for my foolishness tonight. Thank you.