

Innate Clarity:

Paññā Pāramī



The fourth of the vehicles that cross the flood of the world is wisdom — *paññā*. This is the discriminative faculty that operates through discernment or clarity, rather than a learned store of knowledge. It's a faculty that we all already have. To quote the Buddhist scriptures: '*wisdom and consciousness ... are conjoined*' (M. 43.5). In other words wherever there is consciousness there is wisdom, because wisdom is the faculty that makes distinctions — between pain and pleasure, safe and threatening, black and white. For the lower forms of animal life, this faculty is programmed solely around sense contact. For example, an amoeba can differentiate between pain and pleasure, but it doesn't have issues around self-worth. Those creatures that have more evolved forms of discernment are acknowledged to be 'higher' forms of life. Sparrows learn about milk in bottles and peck the silver foil off the top to get a drink. Mammals can learn how to manage their environment and their social order; they know when things are safe, and when it's time to relax and enjoy life. In fact, dolphins seem to do better than humans on that score. But for humans the possible development of wisdom is to be clear about the mind. Wherever there is consciousness there is wisdom, but for humans the job is for '*wisdom to be developed, and consciousness is to be fully understood*' (M. 43.6).

Yes, the human mind is a mixed blessing. We can witness our instincts and responses and discern what is good/appropriate/skilful from its opposite; but we can also get so lost in the theories

and viewpoints that we've adopted in order to measure our responses, that we get confused and stressed. We can get so thrown around by what we think we should be, and what we fear we might be, and the ways we wish other people would be, that we lose the balance of clarity. So with a human mind it's imperative to develop the wisdom faculty in the right way. This entails balancing the need for ideas, aims and procedures with the understanding of how all this mental stuff affects us. Without balance we get top-heavy and so contrived that getting through a day is a major undertaking. So it's essential to develop the wisdom that oversees or transcends mind consciousness with its values and dogmatic biases, its compassion and depression, its love and its lust. This transcending wisdom, or deep clarity, is the perfection that accompanies every other *pāramī* and is brought to full development, use and effect by them. Without it, life can be a real mess.

Three Aspects of Wisdom

The development of wisdom is on three fronts. The first is the learning aspect: that is, the function of picking up and assimilating some ideas. This is what is called *pariyatti*, conceptual wisdom or theory, which we might obtain from a book, or from listening to a talk. The second is the wisdom of practice, of directly applying theory in one's life and practising towards clearing away the causes of stress, confusion and suffering. This is called *paṭipatti*. Thirdly, there is the wisdom of realization, or *pañvedha*, which is a confident, clear and peaceful knowing that stands outside of opinions, reactions and biases. It is the kind of knowing that just 'knows' that something is so or not so. It is that purity of knowing that provides release from confusion and stress.

These three aspects of wisdom are symbolized by the Buddhist figurines that carry a book, sword and lotus. The book is the wisdom of theory — *pariyatti*; the sword is wisdom with regards to application, of putting theory into practice — *paṭipatti*; and the lotus is the wisdom of realization — *pañvedha*. The book symbolizes the knowledge, which requires skill to pick up,

assimilate and bear in mind. The sword symbolizes the energetic cutting off of delusion and entanglements. It requires the wisdom to know what to cut through, so that you don't cut off your intelligence by hacking in the wrong direction. Applied practice isn't about eliminating thoughts and feelings; it's not butchery of the heart. It's a clearing away of confusion that allows the lotus of realization to come to light and blossom.

In a way, these three are sequential, although not quite as straightforward as first A, then B, then C. The way that they generally come into play is that you get some advice, make a considered effort and get some degree of realization. There's enough clear seeing to give you confidence in the theory, so you make more of the mind accessible through further application, and then you can subsequently broaden or deepen the realization. The process loops around, but it begins with mapping out a basis for an enquiry into cause and effect. We investigate: what is for our long-term benefit rather than short-term gain? What is for our welfare, the welfare of others and leads to peace? What kind of immediate happiness actually causes us unhappiness in the long run — and what are the causes or triggers for those trajectories? We don't always apply our wisdom to our impulses, such as overspending, incompatible relationships or substance abuse, because as ideas and impulses they all feel good at the time! Just to know that you have a reliable resource and can map out where you're going is already a kind of release — from being clueless.

So a lotus begins to bud with the first glimpse of clarity at a theoretical level. Then we can look into what the mind's cooking up and get clear as to what's stoking the fire. Maybe we're trying to possess or control a situation that can't be held, or make a son, daughter or partner be something that they're not. Or we're resisting an uncomfortable feeling, getting defensive and pretending it isn't there (while denying that we're being defensive). When you realize that you're trying to push a river uphill, or stop it flowing downhill, and that it's a waste of energy, that's a further budding of the lotus. Then, having the idea that

you can release yourself from stress, you stop wasting your time and energy in unnecessary holding or pushing or resisting. That's another release, one which encourages your wisdom sword to cut off the tangles, biases, desires and worries that bind you into unnecessary effort. The energy that is caught up with confused misunderstanding and wrong activities — whether psychological, physical or emotional — then gets released. It is subsumed into the energy of the mind, and there is a feeling of wholeness, peace and freedom. In fact every time we have some kind of realization, energy is untangled and settles, making the mind feel bright. And to know that it's well worth going through the struggle and enquiry to get there is the wisdom that keeps you going through the next challenge.

Wisdom is an innate faculty, and it's not just theoretical. It's more like the discernment of a raccoon whose wise paws can distinguish between a rock and a clam in a stream. In a similar way, our minds have an awareness that is able to receive and evaluate the states they go through. This mental awareness (*citta*) already has enough wisdom to recognize and resonate with qualities like kindness, generosity, truthfulness and integrity. We know what goodness feels like when it occurs; it is something that strikes us. Then if we reflect and consider the message that our clarity, rather than our confusion, gives us, we steer towards that goodness, both because it makes us feel good and because it brings balance into our world. The path out of confusion and stress therefore begins with accessing this reflective awareness and bringing it to the fore.

Reflective awareness has to be developed through deliberate encouragement and practice, such as through exercises of meditation, because the default is to let assumptions, beliefs, passions and worries lead the mind — because they speak the loudest. So an important piece of theory is to remember to take the time and create the occasions to bring our wisdom forth. This is how *pariyatti* or theory, leads on to *paṭipatti* — practice.

And practice leads on to realization. For example, one can remember to attune to kindness, honesty and generosity, practise

evaluating that experience and realize, ‘That was good for myself and others and takes me to a good place: I’d like to do more of that.’ That piece then goes into one’s personal book of wisdom. Accordingly, as clarity about the feel of one’s activities grows, acting with more conscience and concern towards other people and creatures is a natural result. So when wisdom comes to the fore, other virtues get boosted.

Wisdom is not just a matter of refined intellect — psychopaths and dictators can be very cunning — but of our ability to evaluate mind states as they are directly felt in the present. And the rule of thumb is: ‘If it doesn’t support other *pāramī*, it isn’t real wisdom; it’s just an opinion.’ True wisdom senses balance and wholeness, discerns cause and effect, and realizes the fruit, the blossoming of clarity and happiness. This is the wisdom of right view. It’s for my long-term welfare, for the welfare of others and leads out of stress.

Wisdom Develops a Path Out of Suffering

Practice-wisdom grows especially well through meditation. Meditation in the Buddhist sense means the cultivation of calm and insight (*samatha-vipassanā*), and the development of mindfulness (*sati*) and concentration (*samādhi*) to bring those about. Mindfulness is the faculty that bears a feeling, idea, process or sensation in mind. Sustained, it counteracts scattered attention and impulsiveness. Concentration is the deepening into the steadiness that mindfulness brings, a deepening that becomes pleasurable. These two support calm. And when the mind is calm we can look into it and bring wisdom to bear on the roots of mental action. This penetrative inward looking, or insight, is needed because it’s often the case that we don’t really know or aren’t clear about the causes, motivations and effects of what we’re doing. The basis of action gets buried beneath the sheer quantity of action our minds get involved with.

Wisdom in meditation comes through handling and evaluating our experience in terms of how it affects our mental awareness. Insight looks at whether sights, sounds, thoughts or attitudes feel

rough, tight or bright; whether they bring around a contracted and stressful state of being or an open and released state. As you pick up the marks of the unskilful or the skilful from the state of your mind, and as you see how they arise, insight develops. Your wisdom takes on an embodied, heart- and gut-knowing, which is clear and gets to the point — such as: ‘It feels like the problem isn’t that people want a lot from me, it’s more that I’m a compulsive do-er. I demand too much of myself.’ For this felt knowing you have to calm the mind and enquire with reflective awareness, rather than think about yourself. Then you can see: ‘This is suffering; the cause is a craving to be some state or another; there can be a letting go of that craving; this is how to bring it about.’ You get a personal read-out on the Four Noble Truths — suffering, origin, ceasing and Path.

The methods for letting go of the cause of suffering provide an ongoing Path, the Fourth Truth. We focus on this process in formal meditation exercises, and also in daily life. It’s about knowing the good and living it out, knowing the bad and steering away from it — and being aware of the results. Then, through acquiring the results of goodness, one begins to feel clear and in tune with goodness. One can see when there’s something dissonant. Maybe we see a grudge, or a demand we make on ourselves — or how we identify with a role or a function, and adopt an inner verdict of being a success or a failure. However, when mental awareness clearly discerns: ‘All this is something that passes through awareness. These are states that I can step back from,’ we see the stress and the possibility for release. Then with that release, we feel the quiet happiness of clarity and confidence; and with that the pressure abates.

If you let this process unfold, you’ll find that you do good things, not because of some identity with being good, but just because it feels good in a reliable and holistic way. ‘This is good for others and good for me.’ You feel confident about doing good; you aren’t embarrassed by it. You don’t feel your acts of goodness are inadequate, useless or pointless, or that somebody else can do better. It doesn’t matter whether anyone else can do better or if

anyone else notices or cares. What is of immediate and discernable relevance is whether your own mind is in a skilful or unskilful state. So wisdom as a perfection gives us our own ground. It is the discernment to feel what is right and what is wrong, in a truly intrinsic way rather than through a competitive 'I'm better than you are, this is the only way' bias. And the result is that aware intelligence, rather than self-image, governs the heart.

Wisdom Needs Meditation

Wisdom builds on the basis of renunciation. Renunciation is a part of meditation: we deliberately put aside going out through the sense doors. This is restraint: it's the first thing we do. We come to the point where we feel we want to check the outreach through the senses, because our wisdom tells us that reaching out is throwing us off balance. So putting aside the outreach, we turn inwards and stabilize the attention by pausing, and then establishing mindfulness on a suitable meditation topic. This is a beginning.

Although renunciation seems to mean putting aside sensory activity, this is really only a rough guide since the sense world is something that we are born into and have to engage with. More accurately, wise renunciation means working with sensory impact, so that we don't react by running out through the senses, or contracting into a tight defence. We need to maintain balance. Discernment can get pushed to one side by the blind energy of impulses, or by the equally blind denial or suppression of sensory input. So the practice is to know how to use restraint wisely. It's a matter of pausing, backing off a little from sense contact, and with that broader perspective reflecting on what feels skilful or unskilful. Then we can pick up engagement from a clear, ethical and compassionate place. Without the balance that restraint offers, the wisdom faculty doesn't have a still and firm state to refer to; it has no point from which to give a reading.

So mindfulness, bearing a point or theme in mind, is a key asset in the development of wisdom. It gives us access to the 'feel' of

knowing, a feeling of quiet assurance and balance. In meditation this wisdom of recognition is called 'full awareness' (*sampajañña*). This faculty recognizes what's happening in the mind at any moment. At first what full awareness tells you is that your attention stays still for about one second before it twitches to the next item. Yet full awareness also recognizes: 'Mindfulness can be established for this moment.' It encourages: 'Just do this for a moment; just try to start looking at your experience.' It doesn't carry the pressure of 'you have always got to keep this going.' Mindfulness might fall away from its point or theme, but then full awareness says, 'Stop. Just for this moment pick it up again.' Direct applied wisdom can only operate in this moment. As soon as you stray from this moment, you're no longer in the domain of the wisdom that blossoms into realization.

Mindfulness of breathing is a very good way of staying with the moment because you only have to deal with one thing at a time: one inhalation, one exhalation, half an inhalation, or the pause between an in- and out-breath. Therefore you are applying yourself to very small increments of experience. With this method, the wisdom you already have has a seedbed to grow on. You can't plant the seed of wisdom in the on-flowing slips and slides of mental currents, but you can carve out a little niche in the steady ground of breathing and pop a seed in there. It's rather like planting grass in shifting sand dunes: you see where, through careful effort, you can eventually anchor the drift.

This moment-at-a-time reference also gives us the opportunity to get out of the time frames that the flood of becoming (*bhava*) foists upon us. These include the voice that says, 'Got to get still; when is the clear light coming?' With penetrative wisdom, nurtured through mindfulness and full awareness, these thoughts can be transformed into, 'Impatience here ... Well, let's just take a moment and be with one exhalation.' Then there's the tenacious urge to run away from it all (*vibhava*) which says, 'I never want to be bothered with this again. I want to get all my problems over with. I've been sitting for ages; everything should be over by now, shouldn't it?' But with wisdom we put aside both the urge to

accumulate and gobble up experience, and the urge to get rid of experience. Instead we practise wisdom: through checking the mind and restraining those reflexes moment to moment. Then there's some realization, you get to know the mind and look beneath the mirage of its activity. Restrain the worry, impatience and conceit; tether your mental energy to the body. Already you are starting to take away some of the fuel for neediness and craving. And, you get a sense for the wise knowing that supervises this practice.

This knowing awareness gets lost when we cling to states of mind, because these are in motion. We get pulled off balance by emotionally-powered thoughts that demand that we follow them, fix them, get rid of them or worry about them. So we have to learn to undo this habit of reaching for, adopting or clinging. Getting a feel for how pushy or unkind we can be to ourselves in this respect points to the need for the renunciation of self-image, for letting go of the effort to be what our driven minds demand of us. You can never satisfy a driven mind. So a wise person is someone who can give up the ranting of the self to find a more natural tune; they can see how the clamouring and the clutching, the fearing and the grasping, are unnecessary and not worth hosting.

All clinging, to sense data or to psychological drives, is bound up with ignorance, a deep un-knowing in which awareness is pulled this way and that. This loss of balanced awareness fosters various kinds of thirst (*taṇhā*): for sense contact (*kāma-taṇhā*), for being something (*bhava-taṇhā*), or for not being anything at all (*vibhava-taṇhā*). Getting needy around sights, sounds and sensations isn't good news, because not everything we see, hear, taste, smell or touch is pleasant; and all of it is changeable. So this thirst tunes us in to a pretty unfulfilling channel. Much the same can be said for *bhava-taṇhā* — the thirst for a state of mind, or a position in society. It aims to make us feel solid and secure, but how many 'successful' people are really calm and assured in themselves? *Vibhava-taṇhā* is the drive to get away from something that triggers embarrassment, anxiety or loss of self-image. With this we look

to escape from the chaos of feeling, so we try to seal ourselves off from the awkward instincts of our reflexes: a sure way to develop neurosis and denial. Unchecked, these drives cause us to contract into habits that end up defining us: my attachment to winning an argument, my need for approval which makes me compliant but secretly resentful of others, my habitual self-disparagement which attempts to purge me of what I think are my sins and weaknesses. And the sum total of all that gets to be a secret identity, a self-view that our normal self doesn't know how to let go of. Hence *dukkha* — imbalance, denial, agitation.

These drives are made particularly tenacious because everything in the world tends to feed them. The world in general is geared to 'the carrot and stick' way of operating. Fame, praise, gain, status, power and excitement condition the personality, and this contaminates a very important aspect of our functioning and communication. Personality is the psychological interface between the realm of feeling and mind states and the realm of function and behaviour. It's a pretty important manager. However, it gets seduced by notions of prestige and fulfilment. So the manager takes a bribe and instead of serving as a facilitator, gets told that it is the real self, that it needs to look good and feel good, and that the way to do that is to ignore inner balance. Then this self-view takes over to the point of extreme delusion; people get hung up on how they look, how suave or cool or powerful they are — all of which is superficial and subject to change.

Moreover, the personality ignores the fact of death, ignores the fact that it is just a construction, and ignores the wisdom that would align it to these truths. We can therefore be rendered incapable of coming to terms with the mortality, fragility or the limitations of the human condition. We can't manage the push and pull of feelings. So people blow up and fight at football matches, or jump off a cliff when they lose their job, or go mad with revenge when they feel insulted. Either that or these reflexes are ignored, or shamed and criminalized. With self-view, wisdom isn't developed and our personality isn't able to manage what life brings up in a balanced and peaceful way.

Meeting the Waves

Psychological thirst can be wisely addressed through meditation practice. When we come to meditation we turn off the glare of sense contact and sit still to establish a calm and introspective environment. Because of this basic calm (*samatha*), the drive that comes with sense contact is checked — we're not getting engrossed with sights, touches and all of that. Nor are we getting ahead, being a star or getting ego-affirmation. On the other hand, the urge to get away is checked by drawing attention into feeling the presence of the body, here and now. So these drives are muted by calm and stillness, and this makes it possible to witness and evaluate them, and refer them to the basic sanity of our inner balance. This subsequent process of evaluation sets up the path of insight (*vipassanā*).

As we meditate insightfully, we notice the underlying characteristic of whatever grabs hold of our attention. A lot of the time it feels restless or trapped. Whether it's a worried thought or an eager plan, it's accompanied by a restless urging, an inability to be still or comfortable with oneself. There's always holding on, pushing, beckoning or tickling somewhere. It's a restless existence. But to get through that means meeting these waves with *pāramī*. In this respect, insight-enquiry focuses on the underlying *quality* of the wave, rather than the *topic* that is churning the mind. Insight wisdom puts aside the tribunals over the past, and the prognosis for the future; it doesn't buy into speculation and option fever; and it has no demand or knowledge of how things are supposed to be. Instead, it furthers learning skills to relate to these undercurrents. It doesn't try to smash the waves down or straighten the sea; it doesn't build walls or retreat; it just stands on the true ground of awareness and lets the waves pass through a moment at a time. This strengthens access to a ground where the untrained mind can find only an unsure footing. So a wise person delights in meeting the waves, because this is how the true strength and beauty of the mind come forth.

I'll refer to walking meditation to illustrate this, in which the moment-by-moment process is very evident. You have the reality of physically taking one step at a time and that is a very good thing to gear down to — just one step at a time. Feel the subtle shift of pressures and effort in moving the body, and learn to walk without tension. Make the path somewhere between twenty and thirty steps (not too short or too long) and deliberately stop at the end of each walking set. However, be sure not to stop only physically but also psychologically — to rest the rolling on of the mind and just be present. Within this practice you keep coming back to the reference point of being present with the body and with the dying down of the resonances and echoes of what has been occurring for you during those twenty or so paces. You stop and attend carefully to standing. That shift from moving to standing is quite a significant and useful one since in a standing meditation one is continually brought back to the fullness of the body with no aim, and there's a sense of open presence. Then, deliberately intend to walk, picking it up with a sense of willingness and going through with it.

In any meditative process, one aim is to clean out unwholesome states. It's rather like washing a shirt. You put it in the water and swish it around; you don't just let it sit there in a bucket. You're supposed to apply some energy and rub it so the dirt comes out — but you don't tear the cloth either. So with walking meditation, the walking is firm, clearly distinct, but one step at a time; it's a gentle but persistent exertion. It includes the moments of rest. When you take it like that, there is time for stopping and reviewing, and that involves and calms the thinking mind.

In this way you get to calm the sea of the mind, and that makes meeting the waves easier. Connecting your mind to walking helps you to see, and feel, where you start panicking or getting indignant about a particular memory, person or activity. Then you can focus on that topic with the attitude, 'Well OK, let's look at that. What is that animosity, jealousy or craving? What's it founded on?' You look into it. You can find yourself walking up and down the meditation path thinking, 'I'm going to tell him, I'm really going to sort him out!' But by steadying the energy of that

impulse with the walking, you come out of its grasp. You can't calmly and gently get angry with someone: if we hold the mind against the walking (or the breathing) it can't sustain a heated, tense state.

The walking practice provides a continuum of effort and energy, along with the continuum of a background calm and steadiness. You learn to let thinking come and go, without putting energy into it, and without fighting with yourself. Through that, you can begin to calm the thinking mind. Because of that *samatha*, you can apply reflective wisdom towards looking into your mind or heart. You have a calm background against which you can see where the bubbling is. Then you can see where the hindrances and attachments are and find a way to release them. You begin to see the rhythms and the spaces between thoughts, where they can be stopped and dispelled. And you see, 'Ah, this is the point of letting go'; or 'This is where I'm hanging on.' Then there's a flash of realization into the Four Noble Truths. This is how calm and insight work together.

Realization: The Flowering of Wisdom

What we see with insight is that all our aversion, our greed or our worry cluster around perceptions or impressions that we have. They're not innate, and they're not self. For instance, when you dislike a person, the person in your mind is actually an accumulation of various impressions that irritate you. The perceptions that do otherwise are screened out. You don't remember the person's suffering, virtue or nobility; you remember their tardiness, greediness, or lack of cooperation. In this way you build up an identikit picture of a person based on a few perceptions. But if you step out of that through calming the mind, you can investigate and acknowledge the things you weren't noticing. Then it's clear that: 'This isn't a person, this is an impression of them I have created out of aversion.' And as you look into that, you learn what your own mind can't tolerate; and as long as that remains the case, you are allowing that picture to have power over you.

You enquire, 'How has my mind gathered together this particular image?' Then you begin to understand that such perceptions are selective impressions based on pain and on not being in touch with, or not being able to handle, the wave of pain. So it gets stuck within us and can't pass. We're sensitive and don't like irritating things; but if we're not wise enough to acknowledge and let go, if we ignorantly shield ourselves from that irritation, these irritants get embedded into anxiety and aversion. You only get past them by looking into them, into how they're caused, and letting them pass through you.

A story may be useful here. It concerns the man who, as an enormous act of generosity, gave the sangha at Cittaviveka a stretch of woodland. He did so also because he wanted the woodland to be regenerated and managed carefully, and he had ideas about how that would happen. However on examination, no one else felt his ideas were practical. But because he was very much an ideas person, he was so disappointed that he couldn't come to the monastery for eighteen years. Instead, he spent eighteen years sitting at home, worrying. So during that time, all the people with whom he had been in contact about the woodland became figures of aversion for him — both the monks in the monastery and the Trust directors. He finally managed to break through this stalemate, and he actually came to the monastery to check things out. Somebody took him for a walk in the real woods — not the imagined, 'ideas' woods — and he saw how beautiful it was. He said, 'I've been worrying about how wrong it all was for eighteen years — and it's all so perfect.' It wasn't the way he wanted it, but he got to see that things didn't have to go in accordance with his ideas. And he gave a big, joyful smile. You could see a huge mass of anxiety and sourness, falling off like a terrible scab from the wound inflicted by clinging to ideas. And underneath that he was fresh and joyful. That's what realization is all about.

The ignorant mind sinks its teeth into something and gets hooked. Then it builds up a perception that we don't want to have challenged. When we have people we dislike, it becomes difficult

to get together and have face-to-face contact. We cling to our impressions and think, 'I'm not going to talk to them. They don't understand anyway.' We get infatuated with our viewpoint because it makes us feel solid, even if it makes us feel miserable. That's how sick *tanhā* is. But to unlock the aversion, we don't have to be right or wrong. All we need is simply to be with the other person or irritating thing and acknowledge that they have other features than our mind-set has presented. Even more to the point, we can undertake this process with regards to ourselves! We can start to liberate ourselves from our perceptions and notions by wisely knowing that the patterns and behaviours of the mind are selective, incomplete and not to be clung to. It's not that they have no truth in them, but most usefully, they show us where we hang on blindly to 'my view, my way.' This self-view is definitely a habit to kick. Life inevitably brings things I don't particularly want. I do manifest as other than ideal. But I can work with that. I don't have to knot up into a contracted heap of hatred over things that aren't the way I want them to be.

With this approach, the sword of wisdom's cut can be light and clean, a mass of suffering falls away, and you experience a suffusion of relief. It is then that you experience *paṭivedha* — the realization, the flowering of wisdom — even if just for a few moments. You realize that rather than holding on in order to have, or to be right or wrong or whatever, your mind can unfold into deep clarity. This is beautiful.

So with wisdom we don't have to contract out of experience; we sustain awareness of it, and blossom through and out of it naturally, just as the lotus grows out of the mud. And we can enjoy that. For us do-ers, acknowledging the ability to enjoy, to be open and to receive realization takes wisdom too. So take the time to savour and enjoy the realization; then it will feed back into the assurance that there is an innate wisdom. This is a change of lineage: rather than belonging to a body, to a family, a job, *kamma* or a mind-set, we belong to wisdom. Wisdom is inherent in being human.