Pāramīs (4 of 10) Wisdom

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Welcome to our fourth day discussing the ten *pāramīs*, often called “the ten perfections.” I don’t know if that’s quite the meaning of the Pali word *pāramī* – it might mean “the ten things that are ultimate,” or “ten things that lead to what is of ultimate value.” It means we highly value these ten qualities. We even see them as forms of wealth. We see them as the greatest wealth. They reside within us. They can be invested in, developed, and grown within us, and they can become stable within us. They are portable, and we carry this wealth with us wherever we go.

The fourth of the *pāramīs* is wisdom (*paññā*). *Paññā* is translated into English in many different ways. The most common is “wisdom,” which is a rich word in English. I think it has wonderful connotations and associations.

Sometimes *paññā* has been translated as “insight.” I like the word “insight” as a translation for *paññā*, because the deepest *paññā* of the tradition comes out of a direct perception of present moment experience. Wisdom arises in the seeing, in the experience – as opposed to being portable in the sense of knowledge that you’ve acquired and then apply. Insight wisdom is a rediscovery. It is the ability to rediscover what is true moment by moment.

Another translation that has a similar connotation is “discernment.” Discernment is something that only exists in the process of discerning – seeing, understanding, distinguishing, and being wise about what’s going on. Whether the translation of *paññā is* “wisdom,” “insight,” or “discernment,” the dictionary also has other meanings like knowledge and clear understanding.

But we can understand that wisdom is something that is immediate. It is not like reading a book, and now you have Buddhist wisdom because you’ve memorized the Four Noble Truths. It is certainly valuable to do that. Instead, we develop ourselves in order to see for ourselves through direct experience what is beneficial and what is not.

I like the adjective “wise,” almost more than the noun “wisdom.” The Buddha defines a wise person as

someone who is concerned with the welfare of self, the welfare of others, the welfare of self and others, and the welfare of the whole world. It is all about welfare. He also says that a wise person does not consider or become concerned with the harm of self, the harm of others, the harm of self or others, or the harm of the whole world.

The idea is that what makes a person wise is not a lot of learning, not a lot of sophisticated knowledge or understanding of the cosmos or the world that we live in. Wisdom is not sophistication. Rather, wisdom is something that's pretty basic, that maybe takes a while to understand and is constantly rediscovered. What is it that's beneficial? What brings welfare? And what is harm? What's harmful? – someone who really understands that is considered a wise person.

One of the great Buddhist questions is one we can ask ourselves as practitioners – "Is it wise? Is what I'm doing wise? Is what I'm saying, what I'm doing with my body, my activity, wise? Even what I think about – is it wise to be engaged in this?" What is the basis of the kind of wisdom that knows what's beneficial?

This is where it's good to appreciate that wisdom arises fourth in the journey through the *pāramī*s. The first three *pāramī*s provide the information that begins to show us where benefit is, and where welfare resides. Generosity,

the first one, is not meant to be obligatory. It is meant to be voluntary, coming out of a spirit or an attitude of generosity. To do it well also means to appreciate the joy, the delight, the satisfaction, and the goodness of generosity – how being generous supports *us*.

I don't know if it's ironic or paradoxical that if you do generosity selfishly – only so *you* can benefit from the joy and the delight of it – then it is also not generosity. For it to be genuinely generous, there has to be a certain degree of selflessness or non-selfishness. In doing something generous, we also benefit. Feeling how generosity opens us, delights us, and provides satisfaction begins to provide a reference point for inner well-being.

Ethical or virtuous conduct, the second *pāramī*, involves the practice of restraint. Sometimes it takes a lot of work to restrain ourselves from some of the unethical or harmful things we want to say or do in certain areas of our life. But it is important to use restraint in a healthy, beneficial way. What is the wise way of engaging in virtuous conduct? How can we do virtuous conduct so that there's the bliss of blamelessness, and the joy and satisfaction of well-being? Can we avail ourselves of that? Can we allow ourselves to feel the goodness, the value, or the wholeness that comes from virtuous conduct?

Sometimes people are virtuous and live a good life, not harming others, but there is not any tendency – maybe there is even a kind of resistance – to allow themselves to feel the goodness of that. In Buddhism, the idea is not to just do ethical or virtuous conduct for its own sake – just restraining ourselves and being rigid about it. Ethical conduct is really done to open and allow something marvelous inside of us to bubble up: joy, happiness, freedom, and ease. This is an easeful way of being in the world because we're living without harming anyone.

Renunciation is not meant to be a burden, something restrictive, or something that diminishes us. Renunciation is the movement of letting go of clinging and holding onto things, so that something good within us can bubble up – so that there is space inside for the contemplative life. There is space inside for compassion, awareness, and mindfulness. There's space inside for wisdom to operate. There is space inside to feel. We begin understanding that we don't just let go of things – we let go *into* the beginning of goodness, wholeness, inner welfare, lightness, ease, or peace – whatever it might be. Renunciation is not about letting go of something and just moving on. It is letting go *so that* we know that something inside that's good has a chance to arise.

In all of these three steps, we are beginning to experience within ourselves something that is healthy, that's a form of inner welfare. The development of sensitivity to what inner welfare is becomes stronger than some of the beliefs and thoughts we have, which might be self-critical or critical and blaming others. We can have philosophies and beliefs operating that are actually oppressive, diminishing, or even harmful, and that do not really make space and room for our amazing potential for "thriving, maturing, and growth." (I'm quoting in English the three words the Buddha sometimes used together.)

What allows for inner growth, inner thriving (imagine that), and inner maturation, or ripening? The first three *pāramī*s give us a reference point for welfare – what is good, helpful, and beneficial. That is the material that allows wisdom to arise. The more we understand what is beneficial, the more we can understand what is harmful, what diminishes us, what restricts us, what goes in the opposite direction of thriving – rather than being nourishing, it de-nourishes us. We begin to have an experiential reference point for what is beneficial and what's not. The first three *pāramī*s lay the groundwork for that.

When we get to the fourth *pāramī*, and ask ourselves, "What is wise?", we don't have to run to the books to understand what that is, but rather, we run to our heart.

We find wisdom inside ourselves, and we can see what that reference point is. With the *pāramī*s, there is often a reciprocal relationship between those that are paired together. So renunciation and wisdom are paired together – the wiser we are about what's beneficial, the more the renunciation can be beneficial.

I think that often we don't think of renunciation in terms of what is beneficial, but that's really the spirit of renunciation in Buddhism. The more we understand what healthy renunciation is, the greater reference point we have for asking the question, "What is beneficial?" Then, when it's appropriate, we are able to see where greater renunciation and letting go can happen. If this is done well and healthily, it gives us an even greater reference point for inner health, nourishment, and thriving.

Cultivating wisdom, we ask ourselves the question, "What is wise?" If you're interested, for 24 hours after I introduce a *pāramī*, I encourage each of you to try to live with that *pāramī* – to think about it, reflect on it, talk to friends about it, read about it, listen to Dharma talks about it. You might do this today with wisdom: reflect on wisdom, consider what wisdom is, maybe read about it. See if you can distinguish between ideas about what is wise, which are a little bit more conceptual and removed, and ideas of wisdom that really point clearly back to what you can experience for yourself.

In the next 24 hours, why don't you really delve deeply into yourself, maybe through the memory of what you've learned in the past. Ask what you have learned within yourself that's experiential – that is a living, lived experience that you can sense and feel – that is a reference point for answering the question, "What is wise? What is wisdom for you?" So, my wise friends, I hope you have a fun and enjoyable time reflecting on the wisdom *pāramī*.

The *pāramī* of wisdom is meant to support your capacity for compassion and your capacity for liberation. That's what makes each of these *pāramī*s a *pāramī*. How does wisdom support these hugely beneficial nourishing things: compassion and liberation? Thank you.