

Paññā (3 of 5) Decisive Wisdom

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Good morning. Today I'm going to give the third dhamette on the wisdom faculty. The form of wisdom to be discussed today is what I call "decisive wisdom." This is wisdom that can make a decision. It can clearly choose what to say, what to do, and how to be with our inner life.

As we sit, practice, and become wise, one of the first things that really helps this process is to develop greater clarity in the mind – the ability to be mindful and clearly aware of what's going on. The clearer we can be, the less we're projecting our opinions, fears, associations, and confusion onto the world. We see more clearly what's happening. As we see more clearly, we differentiate the different details of what's happening

in the moment. That's the distinguishing wisdom I talked about yesterday.

As we see start making more distinctions and seeing differences, we start seeing what's skillful and not skillful or what's helpful and not helpful in the moment. Moreover, we also start seeing or having a sense of the consequences of our actions, which we've started registering. Because we're clear and are tracking what's going on, we notice that when we say X, the communication lines with other people tend to close down, or they become more distant from us. But if we say Y, the communication lines are open, and people can come forward to participate more.

After a while, we see the differences in how we speak. Certain ways have one result, and others have different results. Seeing that clearly allows us to then see the choice: "Do I say X next time, or do I say Y?" Decisive wisdom is the wisdom that knows what the wise thing is to do based on what's important to us.

As we settle and get clearer, we also become in touch with our values, and our capacity for freedom – the capacity to live in an open, non-contracted, non-compulsive way. We see the consequences of how we speak – the impact this has both on others and on ourselves.

It's the same thing with our actions. We start seeing the consequences of what we do in the world. As those consequences register in our clarity and care, we see that there's a choice. We can do something that creates health or 'dis-ease' in social relationships. We can do things that support and nourish our inner life, or things that actually keep us more agitated, contracted, and caught.

As we see these things more, it isn't that we're supposed to just allow or accept it. There is a time and place for the decisive wisdom that makes a decision. The image for this in Mahayana Buddhism is that of the sword of wisdom. Sometimes you want to use that sword. Sometimes, one of the ways to use it is with a very clear, decisive, "No, not that." Hopefully, we have the wisdom to know when this is actually supportive, useful, and nourishing.

This is sometimes clearest in our meditation practice. That's why meditation is such a great laboratory to start seeing and learning about all these forms of wisdom. You're sitting in meditation, and you realize you've had the same thought 500 times, and nothing has really changed, except that the thought is rather mean-spirited towards you. After a while you realize, "Wait a minute. This thought doesn't have a good impact on me. It's not healthy, and there's not much point in repeating this

same thought 501 times. Nothing changes. It's just going around and around."

At some point, the sword of wisdom comes along, and you say very clearly, "No, enough." For some of us, at times, it's like parts of the thinking mind are like a little three-year-old. Sometimes three-year-olds need to have a very decisive 'No.' It was hard for me to come to this with my children. But once I learned the right way to say, "No, you can't do that," they became happier. It was like they were pushing the edges to find out where they were safe. When they heard, "No more of that," then they immediately relaxed and became happy. It was quite impressive. I think sometimes our mind needs to hear that clear, "No. No more of that kind of thinking." Probably it will come back. But then we use the sword of 'No' again.

Wisdom can be very supportive. Sometimes we say a definitive, "Yes. This is what I want to do. This is what I want to make my life about – these values, this freedom, this possibility of not being caught in contractions or compulsion. This is important."

For some people, Dharma practice is the most important thing in their life. They say, "Yes" to it at the cost of everything else, because this is clearly what's most important. It's like artists who decide that art is the most important thing, and they'll be starving artists.

There are Dharma practitioners who become, perhaps not starving Dharma practitioners, but they really say, 'Yes' to something. It's decisive wisdom.

There is decisive wisdom in how we speak: "Yes, I want to appreciate this person." I want to say, "Oh boy, you've worked hard, and I really appreciate what you've done." There is a 'Yes' to that, as opposed to perhaps not saying anything.

This idea of decisive wisdom comes clearly into play around what in Buddhism is called the Four Noble Truths. This is one of the key wisdom teachings of Buddhism. It involves seeing distinctions:

- seeing very clearly what in Buddhism is called 'suffering'
- seeing what causes and conditions contribute to suffering
- sometimes intuitively at first, and then more and more through experience, that there is the amazing possibility of having suffering end. Sometimes it's just in small pieces. But there is a sense of, "Wow, I'm not locked in. It's not required to suffer so much. There is another way."
- clearly seeing the practices that support the possibility of ending suffering.

To simplify these Four Noble Truths, there is the statement, “If there’s craving, you will suffer.” Craving itself is a form of suffering. The word ‘craving’ has to do with compulsions, clinging, and resistance, where we don’t really have freedom anymore to choose. There’s an impulse or compulsion to speak, to act, or to think certain things. We feel like we’re being carried along. We’re contracted and caught in a way that causes a lot of suffering.

The suffering we’re talking about here is not all the ways in which the heart gets broken, or that we can sometimes feel sorrow, sadness, or even hurt. Here, we’re talking about the kind of suffering that arises because of this compulsivity.

As we start seeing this operating more, we see the craving, resistance, pushing away, hostility, greed, and conceit that we’re holding on to. If we’re clinging to anything at all, it’s going to hurt us. We’re going to suffer.

Distinguishing wisdom sees all that. Decisive wisdom says, “No more. I’m going to live in a different way. This is not for me. I am going to disavow the investment, commitment, or authority I’ve granted to my craving and clinging. This is not how I want to live my life.” It can be a very clear decision.

It doesn't mean that we stop by any means. But it's a world of difference to make that shift. It's similar to the shift when we go for refuge. "Yes, it's possible to live in a way that is not caught in the grip of attachments and fear, where we're holding onto something." While it's not easy to let go of craving, as we start seeing the choice that exists, we can say, "Ah, there it is. I don't have to stay with my attachment to drive fast and to rev the cars waiting at a red stop sign." Those are small kinds of craving.

Learn to let go. Learn to let go. Learn to let go.

Or learn to recognize the freedom. Learn to recognize the peace that's available in a very wise way. We're talking about wisdom here. Wisdom is always healthy. That's the caveat. Wisdom is always nourishing.

Then we find a way. Decisive wisdom says, 'No.' Maybe with all the love and care that we're capable of, it says, "I'm not going to crave. I'm not going to do that. I'm no longer going to stand behind it or feed it." Or decisive wisdom says, 'Yes' to being free, and 'Yes' to touching into the place inside where we care and love the world.

So, in decisive wisdom, we're building on distinguishing wisdom. There are checks and balances. We're using mindfulness to see, experience, and understand when our decisive wisdom is not really supportive or when

‘No’ is not really the right way. It may be a little hostile perhaps. Or ‘Yes’ can be too accepting, complacent, or going along with the status quo in a way that’s not healthy.

Hopefully, these two work together – distinguishing wisdom that sees clearly, and decisive wisdom that helps us find our way on the path to freedom. May these two forms of wisdom support and guide you.

I look forward to continuing this sequence about wisdom tomorrow.