

Paññā (4 of 5) Revelatory Wisdom

April 16, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

paññā, wisdom, revelatory, liberation, revealed, mind, experience, clinging, disappearing, meditation, aware, *anicca*, impermanent, clarity, *dukkha*, suffering, calmness

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To continue with the theme of wisdom, Buddhism is often considered to be a wisdom tradition. To some degree, wisdom is seen as the gateway to liberation and living a liberated life. So what is wisdom? One thing that is good to know is that it's a faculty we have – the discerning faculty, the distinguishing faculty, the faculty of seeing and understanding clearly. It's also a capacity we have. It doesn't involve a lot of book learning, study, or learning all the lists of Buddhism. Rather, it's developing our native and natural capacity to see clearly.

A lot of it has to do with becoming clearer in our capacity to be aware. That eventually leads to what I'm going to talk about today as revelatory wisdom. This is an idiosyncratic term that I've come up with. I like it

because it implies that things are revealed to us as we practice – rather than us figuring it out, or trying so hard to understand what's there. We bring ourselves to a place where we allow our experience to show its nature and characteristics to us. We are preparing ourselves for the revelation of the deeper building blocks of experience for the purpose of liberation and no longer clinging to things.

The earlier form of wisdom – the wisdom that distinguishes things – helps us to make choices that move us towards greater clarity. A lot of that has to do with becoming calmer and stiller. It's not because calmness and stillness per se are the point, even though it can be quite nice and enlivening in a wonderful way to have a certain kind of calmness of mind. It's calm that allows us to see more clearly. Then seeing more clearly, we can make better choices that can support the continued deepening of that clarity and stillness.

An analogy for this is that in many places now in the world, things have slowed down because of the shelter in place. There's a lot less traffic and noise in some urban areas, and people are surprised to hear the sounds of birds. They didn't know that there were so many birds in these urban areas, but now they can hear them.

In Venice, people weren't aware of the fish swimming in the canals because the mud was so churned up that the water was brown. You couldn't see into it. Now that there's less traffic in the canals, the water has settled, and people see dolphins and fish swimming there.

Here I tend to forget that there are mountains on the edges of the Bay Area – Mount Diablo, Mount Hamilton. Every once in a while, when the air is clear of smog, I can see with crystal clarity the mountains across the Bay. It's a revelation: "Wow, look at that! They seem so close by."

All of these are examples of something disappearing to create clarity so that we can see much more clearly something that was covered over at other times. It's the same thing with our mind. The calmness and clarity we're cultivating are to settle what obscures our ability to see, the underlying nature of our moment-to-moment experience. One of the things we're settling is our conceptual mind – the mind that lives in memories and in the future, that makes stories, interpretations, and predictions – and even the quieter mind with its simpler concepts.

Some concepts are quite innocent and useful. But to always be thinking about these concepts keeps us in a more active part of the mind. It keeps little things obscured. So for example, I'm sitting here in what's

usually called a meditation hall and I'm thinking in meditation, "I'm sitting in a meditation hall. This is a meditation hall." It's true to a certain degree, but it's keeping the mind busy. I could let go of the concept of a meditation hall and just be aware of the walls, carpet, ceilings, and lights – and just see them. I don't even have to have names for them: lights or carpets. I just become aware and see.

The advantage of quieting the conceptual mind is that with greater clarity, something gets revealed. We see something. We start seeing what I call the underlying building blocks through which we construct the conventional world we live in – the conventional sense of self and ideas of who I am. The value of going to those underlying building blocks is that we have a much better vantage point to see how we make concepts, how we're adding things on top of experience, and how we complicate it more than it needs to be.

In particular, we can see that we are clinging, reaching out to touch and hold – or resisting this whole world of clinging and grasping, which is so subtle. Our deepest clinging is often invisible to us. Invisible doesn't mean insignificant. It's like the underlying roots, a metaphor that the Buddha gave. There are these roots underground, and as long as the roots are there, they're going to keep sprouting plants. If there are the roots of suffering, then those roots are going to continue to

make suffering. So we need to get clear and quiet enough to begin seeing what's under the surface. When we're quiet, we can see the roots of greed, hatred, and delusion – of clinging, grasping, and pushing away.

With this revelatory side of wisdom, the real Insight – insight with a capital 'I' – is said to be that which is universal to all our experiences. Everyone shares these things. It's not personal in the sense that it doesn't have to do with our biography, what's happened to us in our life, or how we were conditioned by society and life experiences. It has to do with what's always true at the underlying level of all experience. To really see that is called insight.

There are three primary insights that are revealed when the mind is clear and calm enough. the first is the degree to which things are inconstant. Often it's called impermanent in English – *anicca*. In some ways, it's fine to call it impermanence. But for some people, that implies that eventually, it's not going to be here. It's going to stop. *Anicca* as a deep insight is also that, but the deeper moment-to-moment experience is that things are inconstant. They're flowing and moving. They're coming here and disappearing – appearing and disappearing over and over again.

I don't want to convince you that this is the case. But as the mind gets quiet and still, we notice that the way we

experience things— and that's an important term, “the way that we experience things,” whatever it might be— is not a constant stream, like it's there continuously. There's something about the way our senses, mind, and how we experience things appears and disappears, appears and disappears.

One of the first places that I discovered this was with pain in meditation when I was instructed to bring very careful attention to the pain. It was almost like I put my attention right in the middle of it. Lo and behold, the idea I had that pain was a solid mass of burning, searing, and stabbing turned out to be somewhat those sensations, but they were pulsing, appearing and disappearing, like little pinpricks coming and going, coming and going. It was fascinating to watch this dance in a little square centimeter of my knee appear and disappear.

When I no longer imputed a solid mass of pain, but rather these inconstant, pinpricking sensations, I had a very different relationship to it. I started to see how I was resisting it, attacking it, building up a self, having self-pity, and all kinds of other things that I didn't really see when it was just a solid mass.

But for all kinds of things – not just painful things – we start seeing the inconstant nature of how things are experienced. The value of that – the kind of clarity that

is revealed – is that it highlights two things for us. It highlights our clinging, how we grasp, and get attached. And it begins to show us there's an alternative. It begins to show us the futility, suffering, and vacuous nature of clinging and attachment. There starts to be a transition where it becomes easier and easier. More and more, what the system does is begin to let go, to soften and open up.

The second insight is into *dukkha* – the suffering, unsatisfactoriness, or subtle irritation that comes in our experience when we're for or against it. And the third insight is that of the not-selfness of experience. Somehow the way we construct our experience, the way we participate in it, the way experience occurs to us – there is an impersonal aspect. Causes and conditions come together, and there's a certain way in which it's a conceptual overlay – the idea of an agent or a self that's responsible or guilty for it all.

This is not to convince you that there is no self. That's not the idea. The idea is that, as the mind gets quiet, still, and clear, there's no longer the overlay of self-concepts on the experience. Experiences in and of themselves can occur without any self imputed to them. It's very freeing to have that happen. It's a relief not to do the work of assuming or living in this idea of self. It's like a vacation from these self ideas. It shows us the possibility of freedom.

Tomorrow is the last of the five forms of wisdom, we'll talk about liberating wisdom.

Today, it's revelatory wisdom. As the mind gets clear, inconstancy is revealed. Then we just allow it to be revealed. That's why I did this meeting thing. Rather than meeting inconstancy, we allow it to just appear and show itself to us so thoroughly that there's no more meeting anymore. It's just the flow of inconstant phenomena in all directions, 360 degrees.

Thank you very much. I so much appreciate the chance to have this time with you, and I look forward to tomorrow.