

Deep Dive Into the 10 Paramitas | 4 Panna or Wisdom

Perfection of Wisdom - Panna

Wisdom in this case means seeing the true nature of the phenomenal world. It is also a deep insight into the Four Noble Truths. Wisdom is perfected by energy, which is the next parami.

Wisdom arises from practice;
Without practice it is lost.
Knowing these two ways of gain and loss,
Conduct yourself so that wisdom grows.
— Dhammapada 282

Buddhism is sometimes known as a wisdom tradition: the practice of awakening is supported by and expressed in a deep understanding of life. Wisdom is also one of the ten qualities or “perfections” developed in Buddhist practice.

The Buddhist tradition distinguishes three kinds of wisdom, each of which has a place in the spiritual life: wisdom acquired through learning, reflection, and developing meditation.

People sometimes hold wisdom in opposition to knowledge, undervaluing study. But in Buddhism, the knowledge that comes from learning is appreciated as a form of wisdom. Studying the teachings is a valuable foundation for the practice. Studying includes reading the words of Buddhist and other spiritual teachers. It can include classes. Traditionally it also includes memorization of Buddhist writings. I sometimes ask practitioners to memorize short texts or passages, and wonderful things can occur. A memorized passage seems to be processed within us in subtle and varied ways apart from our intellectual understanding. A line or passage will suddenly appear in the mind at an opportune time, providing a new perspective on the

teachings or on the words’ application in our lives.

The second form of wisdom is reflective wisdom: using our powers of reflection to think about important themes in our lives. This includes discussions with friends, fellow practitioners, and teachers. Sometimes people think that mindfulness is in opposition to reflection – i.e., because mindfulness is non-discursive, discursive activity must somehow be unspiritual. The tradition, however, doesn’t see reflection and mindfulness as opposed. Each one has its importance.

Any topic can be the subject of careful reflection. In Buddhist practice it is considered valuable to reflect upon, digest, and challenge such teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, impermanence, non-self, karma, and dependent co-arising. An important traditional subject of reflection is death. There is a saying that age brings wisdom. This wisdom may come from increased life experience, but perhaps even more so from a sense of the proximity of death. When the actuality of death becomes clear to us, it can be a source of wisdom. It may clarify our intentions and priorities. Rather than a morbid concern, reflecting on death can help us live our life mindfully, appreciating what is most important.

The third kind of wisdom is that of developing meditation. This is the understanding that arises from developing the qualities of mind – such as mindfulness – that allow us to see deeply into the nature of our experience. Most people take their experience for granted, relating only to surface appearances. We tend not to consider the very nature of the experience itself, and miss an opportunity to see more deeply.

As the non-discursive investigation of mindfulness becomes stronger, our vision is less and less filtered through our ideas. We begin to see things more clearly

for what they are. As mindfulness becomes more penetrating, we see the three universal characteristics of experience: impermanent, unsatisfactory for lasting happiness, and not self.

As we meet these characteristics directly, wisdom grows. We begin to understand the suffering that comes from resisting the constant flux of experience. We begin to see that mindfulness can lead us to a happiness that is not dependent on our experience. And we gain ease in our lives. We find a place of freedom with no self to defend or bolster. We can see our shortcomings and our pain without their limiting us, without believing that they define who we are.

The perfection of wisdom, of insight, comes when the heart and mind neither cling to nor resist anything. Seeing the three characteristics is a powerful step to this perfection. The mind and heart allow experiences to reside and pass through, come and go as they are. From this place, we can more wisely decide how to act, when to take a stand, and how to say what needs to be said. The art of liberation is learning move through life, without the mind or heart becoming contracted or stuck. More often than we realize, we have an alternative to holding things in opposition. Study, reflection and developing meditation strengthen the parami of wisdom that in turn helps us toward liberation, and brings harmony to our lives and the lives of others.

THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM

Wisdom is the chief cause for the practice of the other perfections. Without wisdom, giving and so forth do not become purified and cannot perform their functions. Without wisdom there is no achievement of vision, and without the achievement of vision there can be no accomplishment of virtue. One lacking in virtue and vision cannot achieve concentration, and without concentration one cannot even

secure one's own welfare, much less the lofty goal of providing for the welfare of others. Wisdom has the characteristic of penetrating the real specific nature (of phenomena) like the penetration of an arrow shot by a skilful archer; its function is to illuminate the field of experience, like a lamp; its manifestation is non-confusion, like a guide in a forest; concentration, or the Four Noble Truths, is its proximate cause. Wisdom is mentioned immediately after renunciation: a) because renunciation is perfected and purified by wisdom; b) to show that since concentration is the proximate cause of wisdom, there is no wisdom in the absence of meditation (which requires renunciation or letting go). Great compassion and skilful means (directed toward liberation) are conditions for the perfections. Skillful means is the wisdom which transforms giving (and the other nine perfections) into requisites for awakening. Through wisdom a bodhisattva brings him or herself across (the stream of suffering), through compassion he or she leads others across. Through wisdom one understands the suffering of others, through compassion one strives to alleviate their suffering. Through wisdom one destroys all attachments, but because of compassion, one never desists from activity that benefits others. Through wisdom one is free from "I-making" and "mine-making," through compassion one is free from lethargy and depression. Through wisdom and compassion one becomes one's own protector and the protector of others. Wisdom opposes greed, hatred and delusion in so far as greed, hate and delusion create blindness, while knowledge restores sight.

- *Treatise on the Paramis by Acariya Dhammapala*

A fool conscious of her foolishness is to that extent wise. But a fool who considers himself wise is the one to be called a fool.

-Dhammapada 63

Like someone pointing to treasure
Is the wise person
Who sees your faults and points them out.
Associate with such a sage.

-Dhammapada 76

One is not wise
Only because one speaks a lot.
One who is peaceful, without hate, and fearless
Is said to be wise.
-Dhammapada 258

The Perfections – Wisdom Reflections and Practices

These reflections and the practices can be enriched by discussing them with friends, fellow practitioners, strangers, and if you have chosen to have one, with your Dharma Practice Day buddy. A useful way of engaging with the reflections is to spend a few days with each one, perhaps rereading the reflection to see what new perspectives repeated readings provide. It can be nice to devote some quiet time to focus on these reflections, perhaps while going for a walk or drinking tea.

1. Asking questions is an important foundation of wisdom. Please spend some time coming up with questions about your Buddhist, Spiritual, or mindfulness life. Over 4-5 days write down as many of these questions as possible. Then spend a couple days narrowing the list to the 5 questions that seem most

important to you. Finally spend a day considering what might be your single most important question.

2. Think about who are the wisest people you know. What makes them wise? What qualities of wisdom do you admire in them? How do they behave that manifests wisdom? Under what circumstances do you have access to wisdom? Under what circumstances do you have access to some of the same qualities as the wise people you know?

3. What is wisdom for you? How is it different from knowledge? How do you think a person acquires wisdom? What facilitates access to wisdom? Please find someone you can have a discussion about these questions.

Practices:

1. Buddhist Wisdom is sometimes called Discriminating Wisdom when it helps us see more

clearly the details of our experiences and the choices that we have. In your meditation look more carefully at your experience and see if you can make more distinctions with what is happening. Instead of following your breath look more carefully to notice the details of the breathing. Notice the mood or state you are in and distinguish the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of the mood. If something is uncomfortable, take an interest in looking at the distinct aspects of what is happening. Then, as you make finer distinctions, notice how this might translate to a wiser understanding of what is happening.

2. The intentions we have for our Buddhist practice are supported by wisdom when our discernment shows us how to best follow through on those intentions. During some sessions of meditation and in some daily life situations set your intention to become more calm and peaceful. With that as a reference point, try to avoid doing the things that make you less calm and, instead, do the things that help you become increasingly calm. Afterward reflect on how having this intention helped you to be more discerning and wise.

3. Read a passage from a Dharma book a few times through the day. After reading it, reflect on what you have read. Each time consider anew how the teachings of the passage can be helpful to you.