Wisdom | Discernment | Panna

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This is an introduction to the Buddha's teachings on how to use discernment to find an unending happiness. The main body of this writing consists of passages selected from the Pali Canon—the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—in which the Buddha and his disciples tell how to develop discernment and apply it to the search for that happiness. The purpose of this introduction is to provide context for the passages, making them more accessible to anyone who wants to put their teachings to use.

The Pali word for happiness, sukha, has many levels of meaning: everything from "ease" and "pleasure," through "happiness," and on to outright "bliss." All of these meanings are relevant here. Keep in mind that when any of these words are used in this book, they all refer to the same Pali word. I've chosen the English rendering that seems most appropriate in any given context, but if you prefer, you can replace my choice with any of the others.

The Pali word for discernment, paññā, is often translated as "wisdom." However, there are two connected reasons for translating it as "discernment" instead. The first relates to the place of paññā in the Pali language. It's related to the verb pajanati, which refers to the mental act that discerns events and actions, detecting when they are distinct from one another and when they are connected as causes and effects. Pajanati also refers to the act of judging intentions by their effects and discerning subtle phenomena that are ordinarily hard to detect. Although these mental acts contain an element of wisdom, there is no appropriate English verb related to wisdom that covers all of these functions. The English verb "discern," however, does cover these functions, and so—to keep the connection between the verb and the noun clear—it seems best to translate pajanati as "discern" and paññā as "discernment."

The second reason for translating paññā as "discernment" relates to its role in the practice. As we will see, the Buddha's strategy for finding true happiness is to focus discernment on the processes of intentional action, to determine whether they are skillful—conducive to long-lasting happiness—or not. Part of this strategy, especially at the highest stages of the practice, is to regard discernment itself as an intentional action. This helps you gauge when to foster it and when to abandon it for a higher purpose: total release. Because wisdom is hard to think of as an action, "discernment" seems to work better in practice as a translation for paññā.

The Buddha taught that discernment begins by seeking out knowledgeable contemplatives—people who have trained their minds to gain personal experience of the highest happiness—and asking them, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" To do this demonstrates discernment in four important ways:

• It shows that you know enough to ask the advice of people more experienced than you.

• You realize that happiness comes from your own actions.

• You realize that long-term is better than short-term.

• Above all, you realize that the search for long-term happiness is the most worthy use of your discernment—the search for true happiness is a noble pursuit—and that you need discernment to do it right.

As the question makes clear, “doing it right” means searching for a happiness that lasts. The Buddha discovered in the course of his awakening that two kinds of happiness meet these qualifications: one that’s created by your intentional actions, and one that’s totally uncreated. His terms for these two types of experience are fabricated (sankhata) and unfabricated (asankhata). These two terms are central to his teachings in general, and to his instructions on happiness in particular, so it’s important to understand them.

The term “fabrication” refers both to intentional actions—mental or physical—as well as to the mental or physical conditions they shape. All experience at the senses—the five physical senses and the mind taken as a sixth sense—is fabricated through past and present intentional actions in thought, word, or deed. Past actions provide the raw material for present experience. From this raw material, your present intentions—sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously—select and shape what you actually experience in the present. These present intentions also add to the range of raw material from which you will select and shape experiences in the future.

Because no intentions are constant or permanent, they can’t create a constant or permanent happiness. The best they can create, when they’re trained to be skillful, is a happiness that’s relatively long-lasting and harmless.

The only happiness not subject to change is unfabricated happiness, a happiness that does not depend on intentional actions for its existence. Nibbana (nirvana) is the most famous term for this happiness. It literally means “unbinding” or “freeing.” But the Buddha describes this happiness metaphorically with other terms as well. These include: peace, the deathless, exquisite, bliss, rest, the wonderful, the marvelous, security, the unafflicted, purity, the island, shelter, harbor, refuge, the ultimate.

Even though intentional actions cannot create this happiness, they can be trained to a heightened level of skill where they allow all fabrications—even themselves—to fall still, revealing the unfabricated dimension that they’ve been hiding all along. A traditional metaphor for this process is the desire to go to a park. The desire doesn’t cause the park to be, but it’s what gets you there. Once you’ve arrived, the desire is no longer needed and so falls away on its own [§50].

The most skillful use of discernment, of course, is to pursue unfabricated happiness. But this doesn’t mean that fabricated happiness has no value on the path. The Buddha gave detailed instructions on how to use discernment in pursuing long-term happiness of both sorts. The skills needed for long-term fabricated happiness he taught under the term, “acts of merit” because they produce happiness while causing no one any harm. These acts include generosity, virtue, and the development of universal goodwill. I have already provided a detailed account of these skills in the companion to this book, the study guide named Merit. Here I will provide a short account of what the pursuit of merit and the pursuit of nibbana have in common and where they part ways. Their common features are important, for the pursuit of merit gives preliminary training to discernment in many of the more difficult skills needed to succeed in the pursuit of nibbana. However, their differences are also important, for the pleasant results of meritorious actions can be so satisfying that they can interfere with the desire to go further. When this happens, the Buddha terms the pursuit of merit “ignoble” [§8]. This is why discernment needs further training in realizing the drawbacks of fabricated happiness so that it will be motivated to search for something even more satisfying and reliable, something truly noble and worthwhile.

THE LESSONS OF MERIT

The pursuit of merit is an important precondition for the entire path of practice both internally and externally. On the external level, acts of generosity and virtue done with an attitude of unlimited goodwill help to provide social and physical circumstances that are conducive to the practice. You create an environment where your basic needs are met and you are free from

strife. On the internal level, acts of merit function as parts of the path to nibbana. This path is composed of eight factors [§34], of which three are covered by virtue: speech, right action, and right livelihood. The practice of virtue also exercises three of the qualities necessary for the factor of right mindfulness: ardency, in the effort to keep to the precepts; alertness, in the ability to keep watch over your actions as they're happening to make sure they conform to the precepts; and mindfulness, in the ability to keep your precepts in mind at all times. Meditation on universal goodwill can be used to develop the factor of right concentration, and it also plays a role in the factors of right resolve, right effort, and right mindfulness.

Acts of merit also exercise your discernment. To begin with, they show you the value and importance of your own actions: that you have the ability to choose how you act, and that your actions have consequences in bringing about pleasure or pain. You see for yourself that when you choose to do acts of merit, you gain a more long-lasting happiness than the pleasure that would come from choosing to act in opposite ways: being stingy, acting harmfully, and acting from ill will. Although some of these results take time to appear, others appear in the immediate present. For instance, you see that, when dealing with another person, if you bring an attitude of goodwill to the situation, you experience a very different situation than if you had approached that person with hostility. You're shaping your experiences right in the here and now.

Seeing this leads to an attitude that the Buddha calls heedfulness (appamada): the realization that, given the power of all your actions, you have to be careful in how you choose to act right now, all the time. This, he says, is the attitude underlying all skillful action [§2]. You see the need to use discernment in motivating yourself (1) to act skillfully even in cases where you don't feel like it, and (2) to avoid unskillful actions even when you feel like doing them [§6].

As you develop discernment by acting on this attitude of heedfulness, you foster two aspects of a healthy sense of self that are necessary all along the path: the ability to delay present gratification for the sake of a more reliable happiness in the future, and a sense of confidence—and competence—that you can withstand any unskillful urges that used to get in the way of acting in your own true best interest.

These are all lessons and abilities that you need to bring to the pursuit of an unfabricated happiness as well. Your sense of the power of your actions, as it gets more refined, gives you insight into the way you fabricate even your immediate experiences in the present—even something as simple as seeing an object or hearing a sound. Because of your many past actions bearing potential fruit in the present, the present offers many different potentials—various feelings in the body and mind. Which potentials you choose to focus on and how you choose to deal with them can radically shape what you perceive as actually happening in the present. A face that you may perceive as friendly when you're in an expansive mood, for instance, might strike you as hostile or ridiculous when you're feeling threatened or snide.

Heedfulness helps you see the need to be careful even on this immediate level, for a moment of desire or dislike can lead you to see things in ways that will impel you to act unskillfully now and on into the future. Heedfulness also teaches you that if you want an unending happiness, you can't depend on happiness created by fabrication. You have to dig deeper, to something unfabricated, if you want to find a happiness that's truly reliable. As passage §7 shows, when you reflect further that all levels of being are subject to the vagaries of action, heedfulness grows stronger, into a sense of urgency (samvega) that gives rise to the factors of the path to the unfabricated, leading beyond levels of being of every sort.

As for the healthy sense of self developed in the pursuit of merit, both aspects are useful in the pursuit of nibbana. (1) You need to be able to deny yourself certain pleasures in the present for the sake of the ultimate pleasure of nibbana. This requires the discernment to know how to keep yourself motivated in that direction. When you read the selections from the Canon, take note of how often they discuss ways of keeping your

motivation strong. (2) Because the pursuit of nibbana requires overcoming desires that lead in other directions, the sense of your own competence in overcoming unskillful desires while pursuing merit gives a boost to your confidence that you, too, can follow the path all the way to nibbana.

THE DRAWBACKS OF FABRICATION

These are some of the ways in which the pursuit of merit provides the external wellbeing conducive to the pursuit of nibbana and gives training in the internal skills needed for that pursuit. However, the joy of fabricating acts of merit, along with the fabricated happiness they produce, can prove so satisfying that they lead you to put the pursuit of nibbana aside. Rather than gambling on an unfabricated happiness you have yet to experience, you content yourself with fabricated acts of merit and their fabricated results that you already know.

This is why the next stage of discernment is devoted to developing dispassion for all fabrications. This stage is so important that Ven. Sariputta once singled it out as the best first answer when an intelligent newcomer asks, "What does the Buddha teach?" To paraphrase his answer, the Buddha teaches the subduing of passion and desire for fabrications [§10]. Notice that, from this point of view, the Buddha's central teaching deals with a skill. Subduing these mental states is something you learn to do. Everything else in the Buddha's teachings is aimed at showing you how to do this well. Because the central teaching is a skill, the logical next question focuses on motivation: Why develop this skill? And the answer is that, if you don't, you suffer when fabrications change. If you do develop the skill, then even though fabrications change, their change won't cause you to suffer. That's as far as Ven. Sariputta's answers go in that particular passage. Other passages make the point that the subduing of passion and desire for fabrications not only avoids suffering, but also leads to the highest happiness [§§18–22], which—because it's unfabricated—is not subject to change.

All of these passages are based on two pairs of premises about the nature of experience. The first pair is this: that fabrications—both the processes of fabrication and the fabricated experiences that result—inevitably change, and that all experienced change is a sign of fabrication. The second pair is this: that an unfabricated, unchanging happiness is possible, and that lack of change is a sign of the unfabricated [§70]. These two pairs underlie the entire program for developing discernment in pursuit of nibbana. And they're fairly radical. If every change you experience comes from fabrication, then you're fabricating your experience in ways you don't even realize. This gives some idea of how difficult it is to reach the unfabricated, for it will involve sensitizing yourself to many of the deeply hidden processes of your own mind. Yet this very premise is what makes the experience of a deathless happiness possible, for if change comes from within, then the end of change can come from within as well. If suffering comes from what you do, then you can end it by changing what you do. The path is within your power. Without these premises, the idea of a path to the end of suffering and stress wouldn't make sense. This is why these premises are basic to the path.

These premises also give focus to your practice. You sharpen your discernment by training it to look for change, particularly in any experience that seems to be unchanging. If you catch sight of anything arising or passing away, you've detected an instance of fabrication—a sign that you need to look deeper into the mind to see what's causing that change and how to let it go. When you reach a dimension of experience where fabrication and change are impossible, then you can know for yourself if it's really happiness. That's when you can decide whether the Buddha's premises really work.

Your motivation for doing this, of course, is the fact that the reliability of your happiness is at stake. If unchanging happiness is possible, you don't want to mistake a happiness that changes for one that doesn't. Because there are no outside guarantors for whether you've reached a truly unchanging happiness, your only guarantor is internal: the sharpness and reliability of your own discernment into the presence or absence of change.

The Buddha's program for developing your discernment in this direction follows two simultaneous tracks. The first track is learning to sensitize yourself to the extent that you are already fabricating your experience. The second track is using fabrications to develop the qualities of mind that foster dispassion for all fabrications—including, ultimately, the fabrications underlying those qualities of mind and the qualities themselves. The two tracks often overlap, and are separate only in that the first is focused primarily on the fact of fabrication, whereas the second is focused primarily on evaluating fabrications as to their worth.

To sensitize you to the fact of fabrication, the Buddha employs a two-pronged approach. First he provides several ways of classifying fabrications to help sensitize you to the wide variety of ways in which they function. Then he asks you to fabricate a path of practice so that you can gain direct "hands-on" experience in how fabrications work, how they differ in subtlety, and where their limitations are.

The Buddha's most common way of classifying fabrications is into a set of five khandhas, a word that can be translated as "heap," "mass," or—most commonly—"aggregate." The use of the term "aggregate" for khandha apparently comes from a distinction popular in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, between conglomerates of things that work together in an organic unity—called "systems"—and conglomerates that are just random collections of things, called "aggregates." This translation conveys the useful point that experiences you might ordinarily see as having an organic unity are actually shaped by discrete choices and their results.

The five aggregates are:

• form: any physical phenomenon (although the Buddha's focus here is less on the physical object in itself, and more on your experience of the object);

• feeling: feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain;

• perception: the act of recognizing, mentally labeling, and identifying experiences;

• fabrication: the intentional shaping of experience;

• consciousness: awareness at the six senses.

There's something of an anomaly in that the term "fabrication" covers all five aggregates and yet is listed as one of the five. Passage §11 helps to explain why: The mental act of fabrication shapes the actual experience of all physical and mental experiences in the dimensions of space and time. It chooses among the potentials for any of the aggregates made available by past actions, and turns them into the actual experience of those aggregates in the present. "Fabrication" as a name for one of the aggregates refers specifically to this mental process. As a term for all five aggregates, "fabrication" covers both the processes of fabrication and the fabricated phenomena—physical and mental—that result.

Next. Part 2- Drawbacks of Fabrication continued)