

Wisdom

Teaching given by Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, Edinburgh 2001

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Now I don't know what to say... I was supposed to say something about the use of wisdom. Can you explain to me what that means? [Rinpoche and audience laugh]

As you know, we talk a lot about wisdom in Buddhism. We always mention "wisdom and compassion". Compassion is understandable, I think, where as wisdom seems a little more, obscure, doesn't it? We also talk about wisdom at many different stages. Wisdom can refer to knowledge. Knowledge is what we learn, the information and understanding we get about things. This is, knowing or understanding things. Knowledge brings an insight on how to do things properly and how to act or react in a suitable way. This is also sometimes called wisdom. But sometimes we use the word wisdom to point to a more transcendent form of knowledge. When we talk about wisdom and knowledge as two separate things, then wisdom is an understanding, but understanding through experience. It isn't just intellectual understanding, just information, but rather what we could call a direct experience of the truth, a direct experience of "the way it is". That is Wisdom. And that is very important in the Buddhist way of thinking.

The main cause of the problems and sufferings experienced in the world by sentient beings, including human beings, is basically our negative, disturbing emotions. Disturbing emotions, sometimes called mind poisons, are anger, hatred, ignorance, pride, greed, jealousy and the like. They are called "disturbing" because these emotions disturb the peace of our mind. And when our mind is disturbed and these emotions are very strong, they can some times create a lot of problems. We are so habituated to react with aversion, attachment and ignorance, we are strongly conditioned. This strong conditioning of our way of reacting is sometimes called karma. It is the cause of most of the suffering in our lives. According to the Buddhist approach, we react like this because we are unable to see things - things out there, but especially ourselves - in the right way. We are unable to see things as they really are. We can't completely, truly and directly see ourselves as we really are. This distorted way of seeing is the main, the basic cause of the disturbing emotions or mind poisons, as well as of the conditioning that comes out of it. Therefore, the real remedy recommended, the main way for resolving this problem is to see things as they really are. That's why, from a Buddhist point of view, being able to see things completely, clearly, directly and experientially is considered as the wisdom that can liberate us. Wisdom is what can change the way we perceive, the way we react. Therefore it is always taught that unless we can generate wisdom, unless we can get rid of our distorted way of seeing, we won't be able to uproot our problems. We may be able to change a little bit; we can calm down; we can become a little more peaceful - we can make things not too explosive – but we can't totally change or transform our way of reacting; we can't totally uproot the negative emotions.

This is why wisdom is seen as the only way to completely liberate ourselves. That's the Buddhist way of seeing things. That type of wisdom isn't a theory, a belief or an understanding: it's an experience. It's seeing things clearly, directly and experientially. Seeing clearly doesn't mean one just sees with the eyes, it refers to experiencing with one's whole being. If we can do that, we're able to totally transform our way of reacting and this is actually the most important thing, because when we talk about samsara, nirvana and enlightenment, enlightenment corresponds to the point when wisdom has fully blossomed. "Enlightenment" is the English word; it is not the same word in Tibetan. We call it *Sang Gye*.

Sang means “awakening”, *Gye* means “(to) blossom”. Awakening from a sleep-like state of ignorance, not knowing, not seeing clearly, and not being completely conscious. Blossoming to a fully awakened state, to perfect understanding. Enlightenment is like putting on the light. In the darkness we can’t see things. From the Buddhist point of view, enlightenment is not something new that we gain and that we didn’t have before. Neither do we get rid of things that we had before. We just discover what we didn’t know or see before. It’s like clearing a misunderstanding. When we clear a misunderstanding, we don’t change anything. Nothing is changed; everything remains just the same as it was before. Only the mistaken way of seeing is gone and we now see differently, in the right way.

In the same way, we don’t change the world, we don’t change others and we don’t change ourselves. We just change our wrong, confused or distorted way of seeing. Sometimes enlightenment is described as nothing more than clearing a misunderstanding, seeing slightly differently. That is also why enlightenment is possible. Enlightenment is possible because, from the Buddhist point of view, it is just clearing a wrong way of perceiving, no more than that - at least in theory!

That wrong way of seeing is actually very difficult to clear because the distortion is very strongly and deeply imbedded in us. We are very strongly conditioned and wrapped in layer after layer of all kinds of different assumptions. These assumptions build one upon another. Whatever way we think, it passes through one or another of them. It forms a whole net with many, many layers of misunderstandings. Therefore it is very, very difficult for us to understand and experience how things really are, but if we can, it is then very easy to transform, because it’s actually just a shift in our way of seeing. It’s just a little shift in our way of seeing. Nothing else needs to be changed.

That’s why wisdom is very important. As I already said, this wisdom is not an intellectual thing. It’s not just information. It’s not even a philosophy. This is very important to understand. We Buddhists have many different philosophies. The Buddha’s teachings offer many different philosophies. Some are more materialistic, some are idealist, there’s the Middle Way – so many different views are presented in these philosophical approaches. I sometimes feel that the different Buddhist philosophical schools present wider differences, than those existing between let’s say, for instance, Islam and Christianity. I used to wonder why Muslims and Christians can’t get together, because from my point of view, they had the same philosophy. For a long, long time – and even now - I thought like that and couldn’t fully understand why Muslims and Christians don’t agree, because I thought they shared exactly the same philosophy. The differences between the various Buddhist philosophical schools are much greater! But the main understanding, from a Buddhist point of view is that wisdom is not something that one gets only through understanding.

Of course, intellectual understanding is important as a basis. Human beings are very intellectual beings. We have thoughts and idea, so we have no alternative but to first try to understand things in an intellectual, conceptual way. This is why we are told to study, to reflect and develop a certain understanding of how things are. That’s the usual way. We have to do that. One can’t say that it doesn’t help at all. Intellectual understanding is also, in a way, an experience; one can’t totally say it’s not. It’s a certain level of experience, although it’s not very deep. But that alone, although it can be called wisdom to a certain extent, isn’t total wisdom. Real wisdom is beyond intellectual understanding, although intellectual understanding can lead you to it. It is indeed possible to make wisdom blossom through following different philosophical schools, through different ways, through meditating and going deeply into it. As wisdom is not only based on intellectual understanding but on experience, we can reach it through different means, like devotion for instance. Devotion is very much used in most of the world religions and it is also used in Buddhism. In the Buddhist approach, devotion is not based on belief. It is taken as a method, as a medium.

Devotion is an emotion, but not a negative emotion. It's a positive or at least a neutral emotion. It's not a dull but a vibrant, very clear emotion. And it's not conceptual, it's not a thought. It's just an experience, a very strong and deep experience. If we can relax within it, let our mind be in that state of mind and then "look", we may be able to see the "way we are" very clearly. Throughout history, many people, both in Buddhism and in other religions also, found wisdom through devotion, or within the experience or through the medium of devotion. This is not, I think, necessarily because we would receive what can be called a blessing. And from a Buddhist point of view, blessings are not so much a question of receiving something from outside as of giving from our side, opening ourselves up. The following story, illustrating this, is very popular in the Tibetan Buddhist literature.

There was an old woman in Tibet who was a very devoted Buddhist. Her son used to go to India for business. Every time he went to India, his mother would tell him, "India is a very sacred, very holy land. It's the place where Lord Buddha was born, the place where he taught. Many great saints and masters have lived in India, so it's full of holy places. Therefore please bring back something for me that belonged to the Buddha or was blessed by some great master, something I can put on my altar for prayers and worship." But every time he went, he was so busy that he would forget - like all good sons do... [*Audience and Rinpoche laugh*]. Finally, his mother told him before he left one more time: "Look here boy, listen to me carefully. If this time you don't bring me back something from India for my altar, I will kill myself in front of you!" He promised that he would, of course, bring back a relic for her but, as ever, he forgot all about it.

On his way back, he had almost reached home when he suddenly remembered. "Oh my god! I didn't bring back anything, and my old mother is so stubborn, (She was a Kampa and Kampas are very stubborn!) she might really do something crazy." He was very worried and wondered what he could do. "I can't go back to India but can't return home empty-handed either". He looked around and saw the skeleton of a dog. He took out one of the canine teeth, polished it and wrapped it in a piece of very nice Indian silk. His mother saw the caravans from afar. In Tibet, there used to be long caravans with mules wearing red yak tails waving on their heads and big bells around their necks. One could hear them from many, many miles away. She ran to him and, even before saying, "hello, how are you" or things like that, she asked whether he had something for her this time. "Yes, of course, of course", he replied, "I have one of the Buddha's own teeth." And he gave her "the Buddha's own teeth" wrapped in very nice silk. She was extremely happy and put it on her altar. She would pray and prostrate and everything (in front of it). After a few days, rainbows started to shine out of the "relic" and many different miracles happened.

As it was not Buddha's but a dog's tooth, how could this have happened? It was because of her devotion. This is just to illustrate that blessings are possible. A blessing is not just something we receive. Like everything else, it's an interdependent manifestation. If there is devotion, there is blessing. Whether "somebody" is giving it or not doesn't matter.

Through devotion and also through compassion, many people have gained or have realised wisdom. When one has a real, strong, highly developed compassion also, sometimes it loosens one's self-centredness, one's usual strong grasping at a sense of self-identity. We open up and become spacious. We mingle, we become one with everybody. And within that experience also, one can experience wisdom.

So wisdom is not something that we can develop only through the intellect. It's not only scholars who would gain wisdom. Actually, I'm very sorry to say that, and I hope there are no professors here in the audience, but scholars usually don't have much wisdom [*Rinpoche and audience laugh*]. There's also a story about that.

Naropa was one of the greatest Buddhist scholars in India. He was not just very learned in mundane subjects, but he was also supposed to be the greatest scholar in wise and spiritual matters. He was the most famous professor of Nalanda University. Not only was he a professor, but he was also a great practitioner and a respected teacher who had many, many students. One day, as he was sitting reading a Tantra, a text of a very high wisdom level, and proudly congratulating himself about how clever and wise he was to be able to understand everything that was written in the book, a strange shadow fell over the page he was reading. He looked up and saw a very old and ugly lady. The ugliest old hag one could ever imagine. Old, ugly, dirty and smelly. While speaking, she was even spitting at him. And she asked Naropa: "So you think you understand, don't you? But do you understand?" When Naropa answered that he did, she scorned at him, "Oh, no, you don't understand, you don't understand anything!" Naropa suddenly understood that she was right, it was true, he really didn't understand it. It came like a shock. He saw that he just understood the meaning of the words, but not the real meaning. He then asked her who did understand it and she told him that her brother, Tilopa, did.

Naropa knew that he had to go and see Tilopa. He didn't even take the time to close and roll back his book; he stood up, left everything behind and went at once in search of Tilopa. He searched all over India and finally found him, sitting by a river, catching fish and frying them alive before eating them. A most "un-buddhist" kind of a man. *[audience and Rinpoche laugh]* Nevertheless, Naropa followed him. He followed him for many years, twelve years or something like that. During all that time, Tilopa gave Naropa all the troubles one can think of, but he didn't give him a single teaching. I don't want to tell you the whole story but, at the end, Tilopa got very angry one day, took off one of his wooden shoes and threw it at Naropa's head. Naropa fainted. And when he awoke, he understood everything! He shared Tilopa's wisdom! There was no need for words, because he now had the wisdom, the real understanding. Somehow, going through all the previous trials and difficulties, he had created the right circumstances to understand.

I think there are also similar stories in Christianity. Do you know Tolstoy's story of three monks on the island? Once upon a time, an archbishop was travelling by sea. One day, he anchored near an island. The archbishop rowed to the shore and saw a kind of small chapel. Three monks lived in it. Seeing the archbishop arrive, they were all very excited and happy. They welcomed him warmly. They had never seen an archbishop before. And then they asked him, "Please, give us some teachings." The archbishop asked them whether they knew some. "Yes", they answered, "we pray: "You three, we three, please save us!." They didn't know any proper prayers. The archbishop told them it wasn't right and they had to learn a real prayer. So then he taught them "Our Lord in Heaven" But although he taught them diligently, they didn't learn anything. He had to repeat hundreds of times. And then, at last they knew it by heart and were so happy to be able to say a proper prayer! They thanked the archbishop who went back on the sea. The next morning, the ship was already far from the island when the archbishop saw something coming nearer and nearer towards them on the sea. It was the three monks, running on the water, shouting, "please stop, we want to see the archbishop, please it's urgent!" They came on board to tell the archbishop, "Oh, we've forgotten the prayer. Please teach us once more!" *[Audience and Rinpoche laugh]*. The archbishop said, "No, no, I don't think that's necessary any more, please just do whatever you had been doing before I came!" *[Audience and Rinpoche laugh]*. They had become saints, capable of walking on water. This doesn't come through knowing the right prayers, you know.

So wisdom doesn't necessarily come from developing an intellectual understanding, but from deeply seeing things as they really are. There are many different ways of developing it. From a Buddhist point of view one way is not necessarily the best way for everybody, because there are many different kinds of people. Each person has a different way of seeing,

understanding things and of reacting. So people may understand it through teachings and learning. Some may understand it through devotion. Some may understand it through compassion. Some may understand it through yet another way. It wouldn't be correct to say that one way of teaching or one way of learning or one way of practicing is the only possible way. That's why the Buddha is said to have given 84,000 different kinds of teachings in his lifetime.

It is therefore difficult to suggest only one method to apply in order to realise the nature of things, to realise wisdom. Wisdom is very, very important but it has to come from within. It's not something that somebody else can give you. It's a realisation. This means that we now realise what we did not realise before. We now see what we couldn't see before. It's not something that is foreign to us, something we must gain from outside. That's why we very much emphasize that every being is naturally OK, naturally pure. "Naturally" means here that there's no problem with our intrinsic nature. It's what we call "Buddha-nature". All people have Buddha-nature, because in their true nature they have no problems. The mistakes, the delusions, the distortions, come from a wrong way of seeing. We could say that problems happen somehow accidentally. They're not permanent they're there for a short period of time only.

So therefore, they're not a big thing and all we have to do is to clear up the misunderstanding about how things really are.

That's why we say it's a realisation.