The Tree of Enlightenment

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Chapter Seven

Wisdom

With this chapter we will complete our survey of the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 we looked at the first two groups, or ways, of practice, those of good conduct and mental development. Here we will look at the third way of practice, which is wisdom. At this point we find ourselves faced with an apparent paradox: in the list of eight steps of the path, right understanding and right thought occur first, yet in the context of the three ways of practice, the wisdom group comes last. Why should this be?

Earlier, we used the analogy of mountain-climbing to help explain the relationships among the steps of the path. When you set out to climb a mountain, you must have the summit in view. It is the sight of the summit that imparts the general direction to one's steps. For this reason, even at the very beginning of a climb, you must keep your eyes on the summit. Therefore, right understanding is listed at the very beginning of the steps of the path. Yet in practical terms, you have to climb the lower slopes and scale the intermediate reaches before you can gain the summit, which is the attainment of wisdom. In practical terms, therefore, wisdom comes only at the end of your practice of the path.

Wisdom is described as the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, the understanding of interdependent origination, and the like. What we mean when we say this is simply that the attainment of wisdom is the transformation of these doctrinal items

from mere objects of intellectual knowledge into real, personal experience. In other words, we want to change our knowledge of the Four Noble Truths and the like from mere book learning into actual, living truth. This goal is accomplished first through the cultivation of good conduct, and then specially through the cultivation of mental development.

Anyone can read in a book about the meaning of the Four Noble Truths, interdependent origination, and so forth, but this does not mean he or she has attained wisdom. The Buddha himself said that it was through failing to understand the Four Noble Truths and interdependent origination that we have all gone on in this cycle of birth and death for so long. Obviously, when he said this, he meant something deeper than simple failure to be acquainted intellectually with these items of doctrine.

The term "understanding" must thus be taken in the sense of right understanding, that is to say, direct and immediate understanding. It can be likened to a simple act of perception, like seeing a patch of blue color. Perhaps this is why the language of seeing is so often used to describe the attainment of wisdom. We speak of wisdom in terms of "seeing the truth" or "seeing things as they really are" because the attainment of wisdom is not an intellectual or academic exercise: it is understanding, or "seeing," these truths directly. When this kind of direct understanding of the nature of reality is gained, it is equivalent to the attainment of enlightenment. This opens the door to freedom from suffering and to nirvana.

In Buddhism, wisdom is the key to the realization of the goal of the religion. In some religions, we find that faith is paramount; in other traditions, meditation is supreme. But in

Buddhism, faith is preliminary and meditation is instrumental. The real heart of Buddhism is wisdom.

Two steps of the Noble Eightfold Path are included in the wisdom group: (1) right understanding, and (2) right thought. Right understanding can be said to mean seeing things as they really are—understanding the real truth about things, rather than simply seeing them as they appear to be. What this means in practical terms is insight, penetrative understanding, or seeing beneath the surface of things. If we wanted to explain this in doctrinal terms, we would have to speak about the Four Noble Truths, interdependent origination, impermanence, impersonality, and so forth. But for the moment, let us just talk about the means of gaining right understanding, leaving the contents of that understanding for another occasion. Here, again, the scientific attitude of the Buddha's teaching is evident, because when we examine the means of acquiring right understanding, we find that we begin with objective observation of the world around us and of ourselves. Moreover, objective observation is joined by inquiry, examination, and consideration.

In the course of acquiring right understanding, we find that there are two types of understanding: (i) understanding that we acquire by ourselves, and (ii) understanding that we acquire through others. The latter consists of truths that we are shown by others. Ultimately, these two types of understanding merge because, in the final analysis, real understanding (or, let us say, right understanding) has to be our own. In the meantime, we can, however, distinguish between the understanding we achieve through simple observation of the data of everyday experience and the understanding we achieve through study of the teachings.

Just as, in the case of our personal situations, we are encouraged to observe objectively the facts with which we are presented and then consider their significance, so, when we approach the teachings of the Buddha, we are encouraged first to study and then to consider and examine them. But whether we are talking about observation and inquiry into the truth about our personal experience or about the study and consideration of texts, the third and final step in this process of acquiring knowledge is meditation. It is at this point in the process of acquiring knowledge that the two types of understanding I alluded to earlier become indistinguishable.

To summarize, the means of acquiring right understanding are as follows: (1) on the first stage, you have to observe and study; (2) on the second stage, you have to examine intellectually what you have observed and studied; and (3) on the third stage, you have to meditate on what you have examined and determined intellectually earlier. Let us use a practical example. Say we intend to travel to a certain destination. To prepare ourselves for the journey, we acquire a road map that shows the route we must follow to reach our destination. First we look at the map for directions; then we have to review what we have observed, examining the map to be sure we have understood the indications it gives. Only then can we actually make the journey to our intended destination. The final step in this process—making the actual journey—may be likened to meditation.

Alternatively, suppose you have bought a new piece of equipment for your home or office. It is not enough to read the instructions for its use once through. They must be reread and examined closely to be certain you understand what they mean. Only

when you are sure you have understood them properly can you proceed to operate the new piece of equipment. The act of operating the equipment successfully is analogous to meditation. In the same way, to attain wisdom we must meditate on the knowledge that we have acquired through observation or study and further verified intellectually by means of examination. On the third stage of the process of acquiring right understanding, the knowledge we have gained previously becomes part of our living experience.

Next, we might spend a few moments considering the appropriate attitude to cultivate when approaching the teaching of the Buddha. It is said that, in doing so, we must avoid three flaws, which are explained with the example of a vessel. In this context, we are the vessel, while the teaching is what has to be poured into it.

Now, suppose first that the vessel is covered with a lid: obviously, we will not be able to pour anything into it. This is analogous to the situation of someone who listens to the teaching with a closed mind, that is to say, a mind that is already made up. In such circumstances, the Dharma cannot enter into and fill his mind.

Again, suppose we have a vessel with a hole in the bottom: if we try to fill it with milk, the liquid simply runs out the hole. This is analogous to someone who does not retain what he hears, so that no amount of teaching is of any use.

Finally, suppose we fill the vessel with fresh milk before checking to see that it is clean, and there is some spoiled milk left in it from the previous day: the fresh milk that we pour into the vessel will naturally spoil as well. In the same way, if some-

one listens to the teaching with an impure mind, the teaching will be of no benefit. For example, someone who listens to the Dharma for selfish purposes, say because he wants to gain honor and recognition, is like a vessel already tainted with impurities.

We must all try to avoid these three flaws when we approach the teaching of the Buddha. The correct attitude to adopt in listening to the Dharma is that of a patient who pays careful attention to the advice of his physician. Here the Buddha is like the physician, the teaching functions as the medicine, we are the patient, and the practice of the teaching is the means by which we can be cured of the disease of the afflictions (attachment, aversion, and ignorance), which is the cause of our suffering. We will surely achieve some degree of right understanding if we approach the study of the Dharma with this attitude.

Right understanding itself is often divided into two aspects, or levels: an ordinary level, and a higher one. In Chapter 4, I mentioned the goals that Buddhism offers, which also belong to two different levels: the goal of happiness and prosperity belongs to this life and the next, while the goal of freedom, or nirvana, is the ultimate aim of practice. The ordinary level of right understanding corresponds to this first, mundane goal of the practice of Buddhism, while the higher level of right understanding corresponds to the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.

The first, ordinary aspect of right understanding is concerned with correct appreciation of the relationship between cause and effect, and pertains to moral responsibility for our behavior. Briefly stated, this means that we will experience the effects of our actions sooner or later. If we act well—preserving the values of respect for life, property, truth, and so forth—we

will experience the happy effects of our good actions: in other words, we will enjoy happiness and fortunate conditions in this and in the next life. Conversely, if we act badly, we will experience unhappiness, misery, and unfortunate conditions in this life and in future lives.

The second, higher aspect of right understanding is concerned with seeing things as they really are, and pertains to the ultimate goal of the teaching of the Buddha. What do we mean when we say "see things as they really are"? Again, doctrinal answers can be given: to see things as they really are can mean seeing things as impermanent, as interdependently originated, as impersonal, and so forth. All these answers are correct. All have something to say about seeing things as they really are. But to arrive at an understanding of this first step—and, in a sense, the last step—of the Noble Eightfold Path, we must look for something that all these doctrinal expressions of right understanding have in common. What we find is that all these descriptions of the meaning of right understanding are opposed to ignorance, bondage, and entanglement in the cycle of birth and death.

The Buddha's attainment of enlightenment was essentially an experience of the destruction of ignorance. This experience is most frequently described by the Buddha himself in terms of understanding the Four Noble Truths and interdependent origination, both of which are concerned with the destruction of ignorance. In this sense, ignorance is the central problem for Buddhism. The key conception in both the Four Noble Truths and interdependent origination is ignorance, its consequences and elimination.

Let us look again, for a moment, at the formula of the Four

Noble Truths. The key to transforming our experience from the experience of suffering to that of the end of suffering is understanding the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering. Once we understand the causes of suffering, we can act to achieve the end of suffering. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Four Noble Truths are divided into two groups: the first, which includes the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering, is to be abandoned; the second, which includes the truth of the end of suffering and the truth of the path, is to be gained.

Understanding the cause of suffering enables us to accomplish this. This can be seen clearly in the Buddha's own description of his experience on the night of his enlightenment. When the Buddha perceived the causes of suffering—when he understood that attachment, aversion, and ignorance were those causes—this opened the door to freedom and enlightenment for him. Attachment, aversion, and ignorance are the causes of suffering. But if we want to restrict our examination to the most essential component, we must focus on ignorance, because it is due to ignorance that attachment and aversion arise.

Ignorance is the idea of a permanent, independent personality, or self. It is this conception of an "I," separate from and opposed to the people and things around us, that is the fundamental cause of suffering. Once we have the idea of such an "I," we have a natural inclination toward those things in our experience that sustain and support this "I," and a natural inclination away from those things that we imagine threaten this "I." It is this conception of an independent self that is the fundamental cause of suffering, the root of the various harmful emotions: attachment, aversion,

greed, anger, envy, and jealousy. It is ignorance of the fact that the so-called I, or self, is just a convenient name for a collection of ever-changing, interdependent, contingent factors that is at the bottom of all such emotional entanglements.

But is there a forest apart from the trees? The "I," or self, is just a common name for a collection of processes. When the self is taken to be real and independent, it is a cause of suffering and fear. In this context, believing in an independent self may be likened to mistaking a rope for a snake in the semidarkness. If we come upon a rope in a darkened room, we may assume the rope to be really a snake, and that assumption is a cause of fear. Similarly, because of the darkness of ignorance, we take the impermanent, impersonal processes of feeling, perception, and so forth to be a real, independent self. As a result, we respond to situations with hope and fear, desire certain things and are averse to others, are fond of some people and dislike others.

Therefore, ignorance is the mistaken idea of a permanent ego, or a real self. This teaching of impersonality, or not-self, does not contradict the doctrine of moral responsibility, the law of karma. In fact, you will recall that a moment ago we described right understanding in terms of two aspects—understanding the law of karma, and seeing things as they really are. Once the erroneous notion of the self, which is egocentrism, is dispelled by right understanding, then attachment, aversion, and the other emotional afflictions do not occur. When all these cease, the end of suffering is attained. I do not expect all this to be immediately clear. Indeed, I devote a number of chapters to the notion of ignorance in Buddhism, and to its correctives.

Let us go on, for the present, to the next step of the path that

belongs to the wisdom group—namely, right thought. Here we can begin to see the reintegration, or reapplication, of the wisdom aspect of the path to good conduct, because thought has an immense influence on our behavior. The Buddha said that if we act and speak with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow, whereas if we act and speak with an impure mind, suffering follows as the wheel of a cart follows the hoof of the ox that draws it.

Right thought means avoiding attachment and aversion. The causes of suffering are said to be ignorance, attachment, and aversion. While right understanding removes ignorance, right thought removes attachment and aversion; therefore, right understanding and right thought together remove the causes of suffering.

To remove attachment and greed we must cultivate renunciation, while to remove aversion and anger we must cultivate love and compassion. How do we go about cultivating the attitudes of renunciation and love and compassion, which act as correctives to attachment and aversion? Renunciation is developed by contemplating the unsatisfactory nature of existence, particularly the unsatisfactory nature of pleasures of the senses. Pleasures of the senses are likened to saltwater. A thirsty man who drinks saltwater in the hope of quenching his thirst only finds that it increases. The Buddha also likened sense pleasures to a certain fruit that has an attractive exterior and is fragrant and tasty, but that is poisonous if eaten. Similarly, pleasures are attractive and enjoyable yet cause disaster. Therefore, to cultivate renunciation, you must consider the undesirable consequences of pleasures of the senses.

In addition, we must appreciate the fact that the very nature

of samsara, the cycle of birth and death, is suffering. No matter where we are born within that cycle, our situation will be saturated with suffering. The nature of samsara is suffering, just as the nature of fire is heat. Through understanding the unsatisfactory nature of existence and recognizing the undesirable consequences of pleasures of the senses, we can cultivate renunciation and detachment.

Similarly, we can develop love and compassion through recognizing the essential equality of all living beings. Like us, all living beings fear death and tremble at the idea of punishment. Understanding this, we should not kill other living beings or cause them to be killed. Like us, all living beings desire life and happiness. Understanding this, we should not place ourselves above others or regard ourselves any differently from the way we regard others.

Recognition of the essential equality of all living beings is fundamental to the cultivation of love and compassion. All living beings desire happiness and fear pain just as much as we do. Recognizing this, we ought to regard all with love and compassion. Moreover, we ought to actively cultivate the wish that all living beings be happy and free from suffering. In this way we can all cultivate the beneficial attitudes of renunciation and love and compassion, which correct and eventually eliminate attachment and aversion. Finally, by means of the practice of the wisdom aspect of the path—which includes not only right thought but also right understanding—we can eliminate the afflictions of ignorance, attachment, and aversion, attaining freedom and the supreme happiness of nirvana, which is the ultimate goal of the Noble Eightfold Path.