Understanding Wisdom

In the West, we tend to associate wisdom with accumulation of information. Information is about the world is content. Wisdom in the Buddhist view is about process, specifically about how the self is formed and the effects of self-state formations on life.

Wisdom is perhaps *the* core concept of Buddhism. It is the first aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path, and is composed of two interrelated aspects, Right View/Right Understanding (*Samma Ditthi*) and Right Resolve/Right Intention (*Samma Sankappa*). The Pali word for Wisdom is *panna* (pahn-yah) and the literal translation of that is *a more profound insight into the nature of reality*. The insight is clear awareness of the essential characteristics of human experience, anicca (impermanence), anatta (the absence of an autonomous, enduring self) and dukkha (the distress and confusion that arise because of craving and clinging due to *avijja*, the inability to manifest clear awareness due to inattentiveness. *Avijja* is a term synonymous with *moha* (delusion, *miccha ditthi*, wrong view).

The traditional description of *Samma Ditthi* is, according to Wikipedia: “our actions have consequences; death is not the end, and our actions and beliefs have also consequences after death; the Buddha followed and taught a successful path out of this world and [the other world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_cosmology) (heaven and underworld/hell). Later on, right view came to explicitly include [*karma*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma) and [rebirth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebirth_%28Buddhism%29), and the importance of the [Four Noble Truths](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Noble_Truths), when "insight" became central to Buddhist [soteriology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soteriology).” (Soteriology is the study of salvation).

The traditional description of *Samma Sankappa* is, according to Wikipedia: “the giving up of home and adopting the life of a religious mendicant in order to follow the path; this concept aims at peaceful renunciation, into an environment of non-sensuality, non-ill-will (to loving kindness), away from cruelty (to compassion).”

I prefer to interpret *Samma Ditthi* as *Clear Awareness*, that is, awareness that is not obscured by distress and confusion. This interpretation includes the concept of karma, that is, cause and effect, and isn’t concerned about whether rebirth is a reality. It seems to me that Clear Awareness provides a workable platform for vipassana practice, the function of which is to investigate the true nature of reality.

I prefer to interpret *Samma Sankappa* as *Benevolent Intention*. Our culture is not oriented towards monastic spiritual practice, so renouncing the householder life is unrealistic for realizing Wisdom. Intention is one of the universal conditioning factors (cetasikas), covered in the posting of January 18, “Understanding Intention”. The benevolent orientation here fosters lovingkindness and compassion, as well as generosity and renunciation. In this regard, the clarity and open-mindedness of Clear Awareness provides the opportunity to be guided by Benevolent Intention towards the most karmically appropriate response in a given situation. Ultimately, the application of Wisdom leads to realization that the utmost benevolence is the experience of Nirvana, the Unconditioned nature of reality.

Wisdom is one of the *Five Powers* of Buddhist psychology: *Faith/Conviction* controls doubt, *Energy/Effort/Persistence* controls sloth and torpor, *Mindfulness* controls heedlessness, *Concentration* controls distraction, and *Wisdom/Discernment* controls ignorance.

An important distinction must be understood regarding Wisdom: most understanding of Wisdom is simply conceptual, and that has value. The ultimate value of Wisdom derives from direct experience of anicca, anatta and dukkha, which is the direct consequence of craving and clinging to the misperception of an autonomous and enduring self. In this way, some commentaries describe a “Noble Tenfold Path”, the full realization of Awakening. Wikipedia reports “In the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* which appears in the Chinese and Pali canons, the Buddha explains that cultivation of the noble eightfold path of a learner leads to the development of two further paths of the Arahants, which are right knowledge, or insight (*sammā-ñāṇa*), and right liberation, or release (*sammā-vimutti*).”

Below is the graphic drawn on the whiteboard for display during the talk:

UNDERSTANDING WISDOM

Right Intention (Samma Sankappa)

Right Understanding (Samma Ditthi)

Benevolent Intention

(Metta, Karuna, Mudita)

Clear Awareness

(Free From Hindrances)

Overcomes Craving

Overcomes Clinging

Vipassana Practice

Direct knowledge of Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta

LIBERATION