Realizing Wisdom

The Pali word for Wisdom is *Panna* (pahn-yah), and is the *direct knowledge of the three characteristics concept of Buddhism: anicca* (the experience of the transitory nature of subjective reality), *dukkha* (the distress and confusion that are the consequence of craving and clinging), and *anatta* (the absence of an enduring/autonomous self). It is crucial to discern these characteristics directly, although this discernment is extremely difficult. This realization comes about as conceptual understanding transitions to direct experiential understanding through the practice of vipassana, which is insight into those three characteristics.

Panna is the last of the listing of the cetasikas (cheh-tah-see-kahs), the 52 categories of mind conditioners and represents the ultimate coordination of the Universal Cetasikas (contact, volition, concentration, vitality and attention), the appropriate Particular Cetasikas (moving attention to focus on a mental object, sustaining that focused attention, determination, energy/effort, enthusiasm and will-to-do), and the Universal Wholesome Cetasikas (confidence, mindfulness, moral shame/conscience, respect for consequences, non-attachment, non-aversion and equipoise). As a result of this high level of mental functioning, the mind’s attentional process becomes tranquil, buoyant, pliant, wieldy, proficient, and trustworthy in discerning the three characteristics. This liberating insight manifests through the cetasikas of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, which provides an enhanced level of social and environmental functioning. These virtuous cetasikas also manifest as compassion and sympathetic joy.

Panna is deeply integrated into the conceptual framework of Buddhist liberation processes. It is the Wisdom aggregate of the Noble Eightfold Path, with two attributes: Right Understanding and Right Intention. Right Understanding is the realization of the transient and fabricated nature of subjective experience; Right Intention orients the fabricating process through kindness, compassion, generosity and tolerance. In this context, panna is characterized by three levels of attainment: 1: Understanding based on logical discernment. 2: Understanding based on example—for instance, the example of the Buddha’s Awakening—as well as moments of direct insight into how the fabricating process operates. 3: Understanding through attainment, that is, the direct experiential realization of Nirvana, the Unconditioned nature of subjective reality.

Panna is also described as an element of the Five Faculties (synonymous with the Five Powers), which represent the conditions of the mind that have the capacity to overcome the Five Hindrances and facilitate the qualities that advance the process of Awakening. Here are those faculties/powers, downloaded from an entry in Wikipedia:

1. faith or conviction or belief ([*saddhā*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saddha))
2. energy or persistence or perseverance ([*viriya*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viriya))
3. [mindfulness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness_%28Buddhism%29) or memory (*sati*)
4. stillness of the mind ([*samādhi*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam%C4%81dhi))
5. wisdom or understanding or comprehension ([*pañña*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom_in_Buddhism)).

Confidence counters skeptical doubt, but must be balanced by mindfulness, comprehension and perseverance. Comprehension manifests through the combined integration of the Universal Wholesome Cetasikas and the enhanced attentional process reviewed above.

Energy counters sloth/torpor, but must be balanced by mindfulness, stillness and comprehension. Stillness is not dullness—it is the stability of the mind that occurs when the hindrances are set aside and the various wholesome factors are unified. It is also recognized as Right Effort, that is, the effort to notice and foster the emergence of wholesome self-states to their best effect.

Mindfulness is key to managing the faculties/powers, combined with comprehension and persistence. It monitors the functioning of the various cetasikas, and in cooperation with Right Effort and Right Understanding, fosters Wisdom.

Stillness counters restlessness/worry, sense desire and aversion/ill-will, but must be monitored by Right Understanding and Right Effort to avoid sloth/torpor.

Wisdom is the manifestation of the optimal balancing of the other four faculties/powers.