

The Fool & the Wise Person

April, 2002

If you look in the word index to the Dhammapada, you find that the two words used most often in the text are the fool and the wise person.

It's a basic distinction. The wise person is one who realizes that the mind needs to be trained, for otherwise there's no true happiness. The fool doesn't see the importance of training the mind, and so just keeps on doing things the way he's been doing them all along.

And so the basic challenge of the text, in fact the basic challenge of all the Buddha's teachings, is, "Which of those two people are you going to be?"

The Buddha's offering is a pretty rigorous training here for the mind. In the West, we like to think that maybe the training is something we can squeeze into our spare time or into our vacations.

But that's not what the Buddha said at all. He said that if you really want to get the most out of the training, it has to be a total commitment. And it's a training in all parts of life: what you do, what you say, what you think.

He starts out with the five precepts. Those are just very general and very basic—the lowest common denominator—and he builds on top of that to higher and higher levels of refinement.

Look at the rules for the monks. The basic code contains 227 rules, but then the Vinaya as a whole has far more many rules than that. In fact, I don't think anybody's ever sat down to count them all, there are so many. Many of them deal with very minor, minor things.

You might wonder: How could such a broad-minded, enlightened person like the Buddha get caught up on the details? Well, it's because of the details that we create suffering for ourselves. It's the little things that we tend to overlook: those are the things that are causing us problems.

Every little movement of the mind is either skillful or unskillful, so you have to watch for each movement. You can't just say, "Oh, it doesn't really matter." Because it does matter.

Unskillful thoughts hide unskillful intentions, and where do these unskillful intentions come from? Have you really looked into them? Sometimes they come from some very basic flaws in our character. So we've got to watch out. We have to be very careful.

Remember the Buddha's final words: "Don't be complacent." Remember that he found the Dhamma out in the wilderness. And many times out in the wilderness, the deciding factor between life and death can often be a matter of very little things. Being careless in little, tiny ways can sometimes lead to your death. So you have to be vigilant, you have to be alert, you have to be heedful of the consequences and the implications of your actions.

So when you're practicing meditation, it's a good way of looking very directly at the little

movements of the mind. Those are the things that keep the mind from settling down.

Why are you so infatuated with the movements of your mind?—these little worlds that you create for yourself: what the Buddha called becoming.

We see becoming both on the micro level and on the macro level. The micro level consists of these little thought worlds that we create, moving off into this, moving off into that. We're just fascinated with our own creations.

It's like that story Jean Piaget told about his daughter. She went through a period, when she was very young, where everytime she had a bowel movement, she wouldn't flush the toilet until she'd made up a story about each little piece floating there in the toilet.

And it's not just a little kids' thing. That's the way most of us are. We have this little creation in the mind that we have to feed on and have to look into and have to get involved in before we're willing to let it go. Then we move on to another one, then another one.

Sometimes just the slightest stirring in the mind creates these things, and yet they can lead on to the macro level: one life after another after another. These worlds that we experience from one birth to the next to the next: They come out of these little movements of the mind. So you can't be careless. What direction is your mind heading in? Where is it going? Do you really want to commit yourself to going there?

This is one of the purposes of the meditation: getting the mind to settle down and be still so that you can see these movements, even the slightest ones. And look into the parts of the mind that you don't like to look into: Where is the dishonesty in your own mind? What are the games that the mind plays with itself?

Often we would rather look everywhere but there, but those are the areas that are causing us suffering. We have to turn around and look directly at them. Because when the mind moves from one little world to the next, it's like the people who put on a play in a theater. When they're going to change the scenery from one scene to the next, they've got to close the curtains. Otherwise, if the audience sees the people up on the stage moving the scenery around, it totally destroys the illusion.

In the same way, the mind has this habit of closing the curtain on itself. And in that process of closing the curtain, all kinds of things can fester, all kinds of things can grow. All these unskillful habits that we have, that's where they like to hide out.

So don't be careless about the mind's slipping away. As soon as you catch it slipping away, bring it back; catch it slipping away, bring it right back again. You've got to be rigorous with the mind. You can't just say, "Well, it doesn't matter. I've got the time. I'll explore this little sidetrack for a while before I get back to the meditation." That habit is what you've got to overcome. So just keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the work that has to be done—because it really does have to be done.

As the Zen people say, we're dealing with a great matter—life and death. It's all being decided right here in the movements of your mind right now. But our complacency shows

itself in the little careless ways that we talk and act and other ways that show our intentions. Because often our intentions are not straight. And nobody can deal with those deviant intentions or defective intentions but us.

If we're not willing to train ourselves in that way, we're not going to let anybody else train ourselves—that's for sure. We're not willing to take criticism, we're not willing to have these things pointed out. That makes it impossible to make any progress in the practice.

So you've got to be careful about the little things. Beginning right now, as you meditate with the little movements of the mind: Try to be as alert to what's going on as you can be. As soon as you detect even the slightest sense that, okay, the mind's going to leave the breath, ask yourself, "Where are you going? What do you want? What do you think you'll get out of those movements? Haven't you been there before?" Come back to the breath. Then try to make the breath as absorbing as possible.

The more sensitive you can be to the breath, the more you find that all these hardnesses that we've developed within ourselves, these rigid ideas we have about, "Well, this has to be that way and that has to be this way," and all the things that hide behind those attitudes: They begin to loosen up a bit. And you can start seeing these things. Many times they're things you don't particularly care to see, but if you're not willing to look at them and deal with them, they're just going to stay there. Things like that never change unless you're willing to make the change.

We all like the idea that someday enlightenment is guaranteed to come and hit us. But it's not going to come unless we do the groundwork, unless we clear things out. We've got to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma.

This is a theme that Ajaan Suwat hammered at over and over again. And as he said, this was one of Ajaan Mun's favorite themes. You can't practice the Dhamma in line with your own likes, or pick and choose that you'd prefer this over that. Because what happens is that you just follow your likes and you avoid all the real work that needs to be done, and you keep living in these fantasy worlds that never get questioned. There's no practice there, it just hangs around in the same old place, goes nowhere at all, just spins around and around and around.

And the question is, have you had enough? When you've had a sense of enough of that stuff, you want to find a way out: That's the beginning of your practice. Until that point it hasn't begun.