

4. Wisdom

May 11, 2017

I saw *Guardians of the Galaxy* last weekend. Has anyone else seen it? Maybe not quite your cup of tea. Well, there's this scene where one character thinks another is being cowardly, and he says "you're just like an old woman!" The other guy, who doesn't get the insult, says "why, because I'm wise?"

This month's Most Excellent Practice is the practice of Wisdom. And while the experience and insight that comes with being an old woman is to be honored, the wisdom spoken about in this list of Most Excellent Practices has a very narrow and clear definition. It isn't the same as sagacity, though a wise person may well be a sage also. And certainly old women should be respected!!

In the messy world of translating ancient languages, the word that is usually translated as *mindfulness* (as in *Mindfulness Meditation*) is more accurately (though less frequently) rendered as *insight*. It is a word that refers to "seeing through" or "seeing into" or "seeing deeply." It is, as I have often told you, about "seeing things as they really are."

Today's word that is usually translated as *wisdom* could be more accurately translated as... *insight*. This word's roots speak of knowledge or understanding that springs up spontaneously or is born into your consciousness. It refers to having a deep understanding of how things really are. The two words mean essentially the same thing, but the *mindfulness* word relates to the process of seeing things as they really are, and the *wisdom* word is about understanding how things really are, which springs up in you when you see it.

And how are things, really? Well, you have heard me say this many times before: things are unsatisfactory, impermanent, and have no fixed thingness, or self, about them. For those of you who are unfamiliar with these concepts, I'll review them very briefly. They are known as "the three marks of existence" and apply to everything that, well, exists. Things are *unsatisfactory* in that there is nothing that can give us deep or lasting fulfillment. We may find temporary or surface happiness, but our contentment cannot be gotten from external things. This is because everything is *impermanent*. Everything changes. Even if you found something that made you happy, you can't depend on it to be there forever, or for it to be able to continue to make you happy. And finally, there is no essence or core or fixed thing you can point to that is you, or anyone else, or anything else. Everything is constantly in motion, changing in response to immediate circumstances. The moment you figure out who you are, you have become someone else.

This is a topic for another talk. Today I want to focus on how this very specific kind of wisdom can be fostered in our own lives.

There are traditionally three aspects to this wisdom that understands things as they really are: wisdom you get through learning, wisdom that arises from reflection, and wisdom that springs from meditation.

One of the basic tenants that I emphasize is that “you can’t know God by knowing *about* God.” Learning *about* something doesn’t give you the first hand experience of doing it or meeting it. You can read all you want to about meditation and how it works and what causes suffering and how to be free from grasping and aversion, but none of that will help you if you don’t actually meditate. You don’t need to know anything at all except for one technique that you actually do.

However, that certainly does not mean that there is something wrong with learning. While it is not *necessary* for liberation, it can be really helpful to have a conceptual understanding of how this reality works and what you are aiming to achieve from your practice. I think most major religions (if not all) hold study of the writings and practices as a virtuous activity. In some religions, it is the most virtuous. It makes sense that you will be more able to follow a path that you can define and understand. My downplaying of study is in contrast to an aversion to practice, but if you are also practicing, then learning is just a step below essential, (whatever that is).

Learn about your path, whatever form it takes. Read scriptures or commentaries or essays or lectures. Go to classes. Listen to podcasts. You don’t need to become an expert, or be able to explain anything to others. But learning about what others have said and experienced will enable you to come to understand your own experiences and values. In Buddhist tradition (and in fact, in my own Christian experience), memorization is often recommended. You might have aversion to rote memorization: it may smack of brainwashing. But if you chose to memorize something you believe to be true and helpful, then you will be giving yourself a gift of knowledge. The passage might seem to process itself somewhere deep inside your consciousness, and then it will arise at unexpected moments when you need a reminder, or an encouragement, or a new insight. It amazes me how frequently the first lines of the 23rd Psalm pop into my mind. I memorized it when I was in the fourth grade. That’s 43 years ago. And oddly, it still comforts me when it comes to mind. I now have a different interpretation of what it means, but the words continue to serve me well.

The knowledge itself is not wisdom of the reality of how things really are, but having that knowledge will aid you on your journey to discover it.

The second form of wisdom is reflective. This is understanding that arises by thinking about stuff. It may seem like it is contrary to mindfulness, which instructs us to watch without getting involved, and to experience without analyzing. But these instructions don't say you aren't allowed to think when you aren't meditating. I mean, the gods gave us brains, shouldn't we use them? Reflection is as valid an undertaking as meditation (though not a replacement!), and is encouraged in many spiritual traditions. You can reflect on anything. When you read a book (or memorize a passage), reflect on what you are reading. Do you agree with it? Why? Or why not? Talk with your friends about what you have heard or experienced. Use your brain and your own judgement to learn about your path.

In Buddhism, there are some classic topics of reflection that are often the butt of jokes: Reflection on the 32 parts of the body, which starts with hair and nails, and later on gets into bile, phlegm, pus, and blood. Reflection on death (especially by visiting the charnel grounds). Far from being morbid, reflecting on these sorts of things—thinking about them, considering them, talking about them—can give you some perspective on who and what you are, and what is really important in your life. In fact, such reflection is not limited to religious traditions. Are you familiar with the Death Cafes that can be found in many cities? “At a Death Cafe people, often strangers, gather to eat cake, drink tea and discuss death. Our objective is 'to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives'. A Death Cafe is a group directed discussion of death with no agenda, objectives or themes. It is a discussion group rather than a grief support or counseling session.”

You could also reflect on positive states, such as joy or gratitude or generosity, or on how wholesome action leads to happiness. Study is important, but equally so is your reflection of what you learn.

Finally, there is the wisdom of meditation. I don't need to go into this in depth. It's my main soapbox and I always come back to it: wisdom from knowledge and wisdom from reflection are both useless unless you actually do the practice. Then you experience this particular and profound wisdom for yourself. Your knowledge and your reflection smooth the way and energize your steps, but it culminates in that knowing-for-yourself, that undeniable experiential knowledge of how things really are, and who you really are.

Wisdom Exercises

1. This week, try learning something specific about your path and then reflect on it. Read an article, or listen to a podcast, or go to a talk, and choose one phrase or sentence or stanza in a poem or whatever that is of particular interest to you. Think about it. Talk to other people about it. You may wish to keep some notes in a journal about your reflections.
2. Consider memorizing the phrase you chose to reflect on. Notice any internal reactions you have to memorizing something, and then observe whether you notice any effect as the result of memorizing it.