

Synopsis on the Practice of Wisdom in Buddhism (Part 1)

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1. The Quintessence of the Buddha's Dharma is the Practice of Wisdom

The Three Essentials Must be Collectively Embodied and Accomplished

The Buddha-dharma is as deep as the ocean, and boundless without limits. Yet its core practice is no other than the three essentials of faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom. All the other various practices within the Buddha-dharma are practices derived from the three essentials, or further developed practices that lead to deeper cultivation of the three essentials, or related practices of the three essentials. Therefore, when studying and practicing the Buddha's teachings, the three essentials must be properly undertaken such that they are mutually nurturing and there are no deficiencies in any of the essentials. Only then will their perfection be achieved.

For beginners, due to differences in spiritual foundation and interest, it is unavoidable there will be more focus on one particular essential. However, this should not occur beyond the initial stage. In order to progress in the study and practice of the Buddha-dharma, perfecting all three essentials is the ultimate goal.

Only Wisdom Fully Reflects the Unique Quality of Buddhism

Notwithstanding the requirement to perfect all three essentials, among all religious practices, the one feature that can fully represent the unique quality of Buddhism is wisdom. In other words, wisdom is the superior quality that Buddhism possesses over all other religions. Accordingly, Buddhism is a rational religion. With regard to any religion in this world, we cannot say that it has no element of wisdom. It is just that the focus of many religions is the expression of faith or compassion.

Only in the religions of India do we find an emphasis on wisdom as well as on the elements of faith and compassion. Therefore, in general, the religions of India possess both religious and philosophical elements. Buddhism is one of the Indian religions rising from such a religious culture, and thus naturally the element of wisdom is also stressed. Nonetheless, according to the Buddha's teachings,¹ the enlightenment achieved by the other Indian religions cannot be the complete accomplishment of true wisdom. Although the practitioners of the other Indian religions may experience excellent spiritual states or develop their experiences into profound metaphysical philosophies,² these are still the achievements of the worldly virtue of meditation.

Before the Buddha attained Buddhahood, he studied under the renowned teachers of that time, such as Ārāḍa-Kālāma. These teachers believed that what they had realized was the

¹ The Buddha had studied under different masters of his era, and upon mastering their teachings, he realized that they were still inadequate for the purpose of full liberation.

² Metaphysical philosophies refer to theories and ideas relating to the very first cause of all things, the ultimate first source or origin of things.

ultimate state of nirvana. However, according to the Buddha’s assessment, their realizations were merely the deep meditative states of “no perception” and “neither perception nor non-perception.”³ Nevertheless, these teachers still suffer from the cycle of life and death within the three realms.⁴ Therefore, although other religions may be able to eliminate a portion of defilement (and, in some cases, this may be a large portion) and acquire an extremely profound and sublime state of freedom that resembles the state of liberation, they remain unable to remove the root of the problem because of a lack of true insight or wisdom. When the strength and influence of the meditative state diminishes, countless defilements begin to arise again, just like the common [Chinese] saying “Wild fires cannot kill off all vegetation; once the spring breeze comes flowing, they grow again.”

Buddhism became established as a religion because the states of meditation attained transcended that of other religions and because it emphasized living life with wisdom. For those of us who are learning and practicing the Buddha’s teachings, if we are unable to fully grasp this core aspect of Buddhism—for example, if we overemphasize faith or compassion or if we purely focus on meditation—then we have lost the unique quality of Buddhism. Although all these practices of faith, compassion and meditation are compulsory parts of Buddhist practice, if we neglect the cultivation of wisdom, we are unable to present the unique, unsurpassed and ultimate quality of Buddhism.

2. Only the Practice of Wisdom Can Lead to the Accomplishment of the Sublime and Profound States in Buddhism

The full spectrum of Buddhist practices is extremely vast, ranging from the basic to the profound and from the small to the great. However, it is mainly the practice of wisdom that surpasses all other worldly religions and philosophies.

In relation to the *Śrāvākayāna* practice,⁵ there are the three progressive trainings. If we add the stage of liberation, four stages in total make up the whole structure of the *Śrāvākayāna* practice. [The three progressive trainings are so named because] with a solid foundation in the training of precepts, the practice of right meditation can be achieved. With the attainment of right meditation, wisdom can be developed. Once true wisdom arises, liberation is attained.

³ The meditative state of “no perception” is the cause for attaining rebirth in the Heaven of No Perception, belonging to the Form Realm. The meditative state of “neither perception nor non-perception” is the deepest meditative state, which can lead to rebirth in the highest heaven in the Formless Realm. In both these states and heavens, the mind’s consciousness is said to be virtually inactive.

⁴ The three realms in Buddhism refer to the Desire Realm, Form Realm and Formless Realm. Humans exist in the realm of desire, which is characterized by the existence of desire and craving, especially the craving for food, sleep and desire for intimacy. That means all beings in the realm of desire possess these characteristics to a greater or lesser extent. The Form Realm and Formless Realm are characterized by the possession of meditative concentration. In the realm of form there is still a physical body while in the Formless Realm the teachings do not talk about a physical body, only a consciousness. In these upper two realms, the desires that are typical of the Desire Realm no longer arise and meditative power is the main source supporting one’s existence. In Buddhism, liberation means to be fully liberated from the bonds of these three realms.

⁵ *Śrāvākayāna* refers to the *śrāvaka* practice. These practitioners listen to and learn from the Buddha and his teachings to attain the liberation of an arhat. In the present day, this vehicle is synonymous with the Theravada practice.

The sequence of the three progressive trainings is like steps that are interdependent, and none can be omitted. However, the quintessential link that is truly able to lead sentient beings to the state of liberation is wisdom.

Now, regarding the *Mahāyāna* practice, the main structure is based on the six *pāramitās*. First, with the *pāramitās* of generosity, morality, endurance and perseverance, we extensively accumulate all the prerequisites of virtues and merits. Then, with the *pāramitā* of meditation, the *pāramitā* of *prajñā*⁶ can be attained, which allows the goal of the *Mahāyāna* to be achieved and all defilement and cyclic existence can be brought to an end. Hence in the *Mahāyāna* texts, we find this common praise: through numerous eons, one may undertake countless practices, but this cannot compare to an instance of correctly contemplating, accepting, bearing in mind and adhering to a few words that present just a single concept from the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*.

Therefore, we can clearly see that despite whether we take the *Mahāyāna* or the *Śrāvakayāna* perspective, if the aim is to end cyclic existence, eliminate all defilements, and realize the truth, this can only be accomplished with the power of wisdom. However, this is not to say that everything apart from wisdom can be ignored. Rather, it means that in the process of eliminating defilements and awakening to the truth, the practice of wisdom cannot be deficient or omitted. In fact, the practice of wisdom is the most important practice throughout the process of cultivation, from start to finish. With wisdom, the profound and sublime state of the Buddha-dharma can be attained.⁷ All the methods of cultivation that can yield liberation have the practice of wisdom as their core, and this is a fundamental principle with no exceptions.

3. The True Meaning of Initiating Wisdom with Meditation

At this point, there is an important issue to note. Within the *Śrāvakayāna* practices, there is a separate progressive training of wisdom, distinct from the progressive training of meditation. Within the *Mahāyāna* practices, after the *pāramitā* of meditation, there is another *pāramitā* of *prajñā*. Therefore, from the perspective of a beginner on the path, undertaking the practice consists of tranquility⁸ and the practice of insight.⁹ The practice of meditation forms the foundation for the practice of wisdom, but the practice of wisdom is not the same as meditation. Therefore, we need to pay careful attention to developing our understanding and practice of wisdom. At the same time, we must not neglect the methods for cultivating tranquility.

⁶ *Prajñā* is a Sanskrit word that is often translated as wisdom. In the Buddhist context, it is usually referring to the type of wisdom that can lead to the realization of the ultimate truth. The word *pāramitā* has the meaning of “going to the opposite shore”, “complete attainment”, “transcendental virtue”. So the six *pāramitās* should be understood as relying on the virtues of generosity, morality, endurance, perseverance, meditation and wisdom to go from the shore of cyclic existence to the opposite shore of perfect liberation.

⁷ Here, the profound and sublime state of Buddha-dharma refers to the attainment of ending cyclic existence, purifying all defilements and realizing the truth—in other words, the attainment of nirvana.

⁸ The attainment of tranquility is the aim of practicing calming meditation in Buddhism.

⁹ The practice of insight refers to the investigative meditation practice with the aim of cultivating wisdom, which is only possible after attaining tranquility and by using tranquility as the foundation.

Some people think that the saying “relying on tranquility¹⁰ to initiate wisdom” means that if tranquility is attained, wisdom will naturally arise. This is a complete misunderstanding of the meaning behind the Buddhist ideal of practice and realization. Similarly, when we say “rely on morality to attain tranquility,” do you think it means that by upholding the precepts purely, tranquility will be attained? Of course this is not the case. Specific practices are required in order to attain tranquility. Similarly, according to the true meaning of the Buddha’s teachings, the attainment of tranquility does not automatically give rise to wisdom. Rather, we rely on the power of tranquility, and with a mind that is tranquil we then practice insight. Only in this way can true wisdom that is beyond worldly knowledge be initiated. Based on this true meaning, when the teaching says to rely on tranquility to initiate wisdom, it does not mean that once tranquility is attained, wisdom will arise automatically. Otherwise, why is it that, unlike the sages in Buddhism, other spiritual practitioners who have also attained various states of meditation still lack the true wisdom required to end their defilements and gain liberation?

Hence we need to understand that based on the underlying principle of studying and practicing the Buddha’s teachings, we should extensively undertake all dharma practices, and among these various dharma practices, only the practice of wisdom is able to guide us directly to reach the profound state of Buddhism.¹¹

4. Only with the Practice of Wisdom can One Become a Sage

In the practice of Buddhism, although there are many methods to suit different practitioners, the crucial element that determines whether a worldly being can become a sage is the possession of true wisdom. Therefore, wisdom can certainly be regarded as the unique quality of the sages. Commonly, it is considered there are ten categories of beings, of whom six are worldly and four are sages. The division between worldly beings and sages is marked by whether they are awakened or unawakened (deluded). That is, with awakening, one becomes a sage; without awakening, one remains a worldly being.

[This quality of wisdom can be seen in the titles given to the sages.] Take, for example, the epithet “buddha”; its meaning is the awakened one. This means one who has awakened to the truth of the universe and life and who fully knows all aspects of each dharma. Because the Buddha has this perfect wisdom encompassing full awakening and knowing, he is called the awakened one. Every buddha is also given the epithets “one who understands the world,” and “one who has completely and perfectly awakened.” A buddha ultimately attains what is described as unsurpassed complete and perfect awakening. No matter whether we consider a buddha from the perspective of his title or his attainment (the title is actually based on the attainment), the core basis lies in his wisdom of enlightenment.

¹⁰ In Chinese there is the saying, “rely on morality to achieve concentration, rely on concentration to achieve wisdom (依戒起定，依定發慧)”. Meditation includes many stages and brings the mind to many different states. Here the term meditation is replaced with tranquility in the saying as it refers to the state of tranquility—*śamatha*.

¹¹ Here the profound state of Buddhism refers to nirvana (see Footnote 7).

Not only is this true for buddhas but also for bodhisattvas and the sages of the two-vehicle.¹² Their epithets are also inseparable from the wisdom of enlightenment. The term “bodhisattva” comes from “*bodhi*” and “*sattva*,” which mean “awakening” and “sentient being” respectively. This compound word can be interpreted as a sentient being that has awakened. This agrees with what Nāgārjuna said: “One who possesses some wisdom¹³ is called a bodhisattva.” The term *pratyekabuddha* in the two-vehicle means “solitary awakened one” or “one who attains awakening through contemplating dependent origination.” As for the title of *śrāvaka*, this means one who attains awakening from listening to the Buddha’s teachings.

All four categories of sages—the buddhas, bodhisattvas, *pratyekabuddhas* and *śrāvakas*—become sages on account of attaining wisdom. Therefore, the name for each of these four categories of sages is inseparable from the meaning of awakening—the only difference is the level of wisdom each has attained.

5. Wisdom is the Foundation of All Virtues

The wisdom that constitutes the unique quality of Buddhism is not like an abstract knowledge, nor is it a dry and unsympathetic rationality. Instead, it is the true wisdom that arises from the unification of and balance between¹⁴ compassion and wisdom. Throughout the course of one’s practice, wisdom is essential. Regardless of whether the aim is to attain enlightenment for oneself or to enlighten others, wisdom is always required as the guide. This is particularly so for the bodhisattvas undertaking the *Mahāyāna*. In order to benefit all sentient beings, bodhisattvas especially need to rely on countless skillful methods.

Therefore, in the *sūtras*, wisdom is highly esteemed, just like Mount Sumeru [is the greatest] among all mountain peaks, or like the *cakravatin* [is the greatest] among all kings.¹⁵ This means that wisdom is the foremost among all virtues and central to all virtues. In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, it is said that “by relying on *prajñāpāramitā*, inconceivable, limitless, countless and boundless virtues are drawn together and guided toward the ocean of the Buddha’s wisdom until one becomes immersed in it.” Within the *śrāvaka* teachings, it is said that “knowledge (wisdom) is the root of all wholesomeness.” It is often highlighted in Buddhist teachings that wisdom is the root of all virtues and that for perfect realization to

¹² Two-vehicle refers to the practitioners of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* paths. When the bodhisattva path is added, collectively they are referred to as the three-vehicle.

¹³ “Wisdom” here refers to true wisdom. It is progressively attained by bodhisattvas, and only buddhas possess true wisdom that is perfect.

¹⁴ Here the Chinese text has the term “理性,” which is commonly translated as “rational.” Sometimes Venerable Yinshun uses “理性” to mean “principle” or “truth.” However, in this sentence, Venerable Yinshun’s use of this term is likely to reflect how compassion and wisdom merge; hence our translation uses “balance between” to reflect the rational aspect.

¹⁵ Mount Sumeru is a mountain in the Buddhist cosmology that is said to exist at the center of the cosmos. It is considered to be the tallest mountain; so high that its peak crosses over into the lower heavenly realms. The mountain is said to be golden in color. The world we humans live in is situated at the southern side of the mountain’s base. Cakravatin refers to a universal ruler who governs over the world with ethics and benevolence. During a *cakravatin*’s rule the world is peaceful, prosperous and free from all sorts of calamities. These two concepts of Mount Sumeru and the *cakravatin* are found in other Indian religions as well

occur, wisdom must become ultimate and perfect. Among all the various dharma practices, wisdom is the foundation of all sages, and we should especially revere it and strive for it.

6. The Various Terms for Wisdom

In both the *Mahāyāna* and *Śrāvakayāna* texts, various terms are used to refer to wisdom. Most commonly seen is the term *prajñā* (慧).¹⁶ In addition are the terms *vipaśyanā* (觀),¹⁷ thorough understanding (忍),¹⁸ view (見),¹⁹ knowing (智),²⁰ skillfulness (方便),²¹ light (光),²² higher knowledge (明),²³ awakening (覺),²⁴ and so forth. In the thirty-seven practices conducive to enlightenment, there are right view (正見),²⁵ right contemplation (正思惟),²⁶ discernment (擇法),²⁷ and so forth. Generally speaking, these are all synonyms for wisdom. Although the underlying essence of each of these terms does not differ greatly, in the teachings of the Buddha-dharma each of these terms does have its specific meaning.

Prajñā (Wisdom), *Jñāna* (Knowing), and *Vipaśyanā* (Insight)

Among all the terms for wisdom, three are especially important: *prajñā* (wisdom), *jñāna* (knowing) and *vipaśyanā* (insight). These three terms for wisdom share common meanings; they also have their unique meanings, which are more distinct than other terms. Of course, the nature of their true essence remains identical.

The term *prajñā*, when compared with other synonyms, can be said to be the most respected, and its meaning is also the most profound and far-reaching. The term *prajñā* is used to refer to all causal practices of wisdom when a practitioner is still on the path. After attaining the goal of ultimate perfection, the term *prajñā* converts to *sarvajñā* (all-knowing, 一切智),²⁸ or bodhi (awakening, 覺). Therefore this transformation is interpreted by Kumārajīva as “*sarvajñā* is the name of *prajñā* that has matured.” *Prajñā* represents the wisdom in the causal stage where a practitioner is still learning and practicing. As for the terms “knowing” and “bodhi,” et cetera, these refer to the resultant *prajñā* that perfectly realizes the truth.

¹⁶ *Prajñā* (Sanskrit), *paññā* (Pali).

¹⁷ *Vipaśyanā* (Sanskrit), *vipassanā* (Pali).

¹⁸ *Kṣānti* (Sanskrit), *khanti* (Pali). *Kṣānti* is usually understood as patience, forbearance, and endurance. However, in the Buddhist context it also refers to the quality of wisdom.

¹⁹ *Darśana* (Sanskrit), *dassana* (Pali).

²⁰ *Jñāna* (Sanskrit), *ñāṇa* (Pali).

²¹ *Upāya* (Sanskrit and Pali).

²² *Āloka* (Sanskrit and Pali).

²³ *Vidyā* (Sanskrit), *vijjā* (Pali).

²⁴ Bodhi (Sanskrit and Pali).

²⁵ *Samyagdr̥ṣṭi* (Sanskrit), *sammādiṭṭhi* (Pali).

²⁶ *Samyaksamkalpa* (Sanskrit), *sammāsankappa* (Pali).

²⁷ *Dharmavicaya* (Sanskrit), *dhammavicaya* (Pali).

²⁸ Here, *sarvajñā* corresponds to *jñāna*. Venerable Yinshun observed that when the word *jñāna* is used in relation to the perfection of wisdom, it is commonly paired with the adjective *sarva* to become *sarvajñā*. *Sarvajñā* is used to represent ultimate perfect wisdom that is all-knowing.

Now let us look at the meaning of *prajñā* and *vipāśyanā*. *Prajñā* has the nature of investigation. The function of this nature in the beginning stage is called *vipāśyanā*. At the start, the wisdom that practitioners cultivate is referred to as *vipāśyanā*. After *vipāśyanā* is accomplished, this wisdom is then called *prajñā*. The purpose in using these different terms to refer to wisdom is to differentiate between the various levels of practice with regard to duration and depth. Therefore, in this context, the terms *prajñā* and *vipāśyanā* basically have the same meaning and nature and can be used to refer to wisdom in all stages of the practice. So if we want to understand the essence of *prajñā*, then we must not neglect the meaning of *vipāśyanā*.

With regard to the meaning of *vipāśyanā*, the Buddha explained it to Maitreya as “the ability to differentiate, thoroughly differentiate, thoroughly investigate, thoroughly analyze, understand, interest, wisdom, view, and insight. All these are used to explain the meaning of *vipāśyanā*.”²⁹ In other words, the function of *vipāśyanā* includes distinguishing, analyzing, investigating, deciding, and so on. All of these can also be applied to *prajñā*. Therefore, *prajñā* is said to be “the nature of investigating the object of focus.”

When cultivating *vipāśyanā*, we should not only seek to know clearly the object of focus but also develop our ability to postulate, discern, analyze, et cetera. Accordingly, in the case where the object of focus relates to worldly phenomena, the ability to postulate, discern, and analyze is required [in order to develop different levels of wisdom³⁰]. In the case where the object of focus relates to the ultimate truth, the ability to analyze, investigate, et cetera, is also required in order to experience and fully comprehend that all phenomena are ultimately empty in nature. This requirement is essential because these abilities—analysis, discernment, etcetera—are the unique qualities of *vipāśyanā*.

In the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, there are teachings about the eighteen types of emptiness, which in essence are various methods for investigating the nature of no intrinsic existence in all phenomena. When the cultivation of *vipāśyanā* is complete, it is called *prajñā*. Therefore, traditionally it is said that “prior to accomplishment, *vipāśyanā* is the insight meditation on emptiness, and after accomplishment it is called *prajñā*.”

Therefore, if a practitioner of the Buddha-dharma thinks from the start that the way to nondiscrimination is to not differentiate and thus fails to perform analysis and discernment in order to properly understand phenomena and the teachings, they will never be able to attain the perfection of wisdom. All they will be cultivating are the states of tranquility.

²⁹ This explanation to Maitreya can be found in the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* (解深密經), which has been translated into English by John Powers and John P. Keenan. Powers’ translation is titled *Wisdom of Buddha: The Samdhinirmocana Mahāyāna Sūtra* and this quote can be found in Chapter 8. Keenan’s translation is titled *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning* and the quote can be found in Chapter 6.

³⁰ See section 10. Progression in the Cultivation of Wisdom.

7. The Ultimate Characteristic of Wisdom

When embarking on the cultivation of wisdom, essentially we should have as our final goal the ultimate and perfect wisdom. Initially, we should have a good general understanding of the characteristics of true wisdom. Without this understanding, our causal practices cannot properly align with the ultimate goal, and this will make it impossible to attain the perfect and ultimate fruition. The wisdom that is being discussed here refers to true wisdom, which ranges from the partial awakening of the bodhisattvas to the perfect awakening of the buddhas.

Regarding the *Mahāyāna*'s teachings on the cultivation of wisdom, Nāgārjuna at one time analyzed and discussed it further. He said that *prajñā* is unlike what the heretics describe, which merely enables them to depart this present world and be reborn in a better realm. Nor is it the same wisdom attained by the two-vehicles, which is strongly inclined to the realization of the truth and lacks great compassion.³¹ Even though, in a broad sense, the wisdom of heretics and the two-vehicle may contain some elements connected with *prajñā*, these types of wisdom cannot ultimately become the perfect wisdom of the *Mahāyāna*. The ultimate characteristic of the true and perfect wisdom attained by *Mahāyāna* practitioners can be understood through the following four aspects.

First is that faith and wisdom function as one. When we talk about wisdom, it is not completely unrelated to faith. Generally, at the start, a practitioner who is on the right path must rely on faith to develop wisdom. Subsequently, they apply wisdom to further strengthen their faith. Thus, the two are interrelated and mutually supportive and they progress hand in hand until they finally function as one. This marks the accomplishment of true wisdom.

At the start, some *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners may be inclined to faith (faith-based practitioners) whereas others are inclined to wisdom (dharma-based practitioners).³² Nevertheless, once they have attained enlightenment, both kinds of practitioners have pure and true faith in the Buddha, dharma, *saṃgha*, and noble precepts—four aspects of realized faith. This is the *Śrāvakayāna*'s state, where faith and wisdom function as one. This state is where pure faith is attained, which in fact is the attainment of true wisdom, the true wisdom that has realized the truth.

The bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, as described in the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, is representative of great wisdom. Mañjuśrī not only expounds and reveals the profound meaning of the true nature of all phenomena but also emphasizes the importance of developing faith in the *Mahāyāna* and making the bodhi vow to attain Buddhahood. This is why Mañjuśrī is called the teacher of

³¹ In terms of the two-vehicle practitioners, when they are said to be lacking in great compassion, this does not mean they have no compassion at all. Although they have compassion, from the *Mahāyāna*'s perspective their compassion is not as deep and great as the bodhisattvas.

³² Faith-based practitioners tend to undertake practices that are more faith orientated, such as the six recollections of the Buddha, dharma, *saṃgha*, precepts, generosity, and the heavens. Dharma-based practitioners are inclined towards practices that focus on developing wisdom and understanding of the dharma, an example is the four factors for entry into sagehood (四預流支): associating with spiritual guides (親近善士), learning the righteous dharma (聽聞正法), contemplating the dharma properly and thoroughly (如理作意), practicing the noble eightfold path for the sake of nirvana (法隨法行).

the buddhas. Mañjuśrī's practice shows that one should make the bodhi vow (right faith in the *Mahāyāna*) and cultivate wisdom to strengthen that vow. Only in this way can great bodhi be attained. This great bodhi is the state where faith and wisdom function as one in the *Mahāyāna*.

Second is the merging of compassion and wisdom. True *prajñā* is also where extensive compassion and profound wisdom merge as one. Therefore, the wisdom of the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, which is biased toward the truth, cannot reflect the full meaning of Buddhism. That is, because they heavily focus on experiencing life rationally³³ and their compassion is insufficiently developed, after attaining the final liberation it is difficult for them to make great vows that focus on tirelessly working to liberate sentient beings and accomplish countless virtuous practices.

However, only the bodhisattvas can attain true *prajñā* because they also possess deep sympathy and great vows to practice compassion when they thoroughly awaken to the nature of all dharmas. Thereafter, as [they engage in benefiting sentient beings and] their loving kindness and compassion becomes more widespread, their wisdom becomes more profound.

In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, it is said that when bodhisattvas' compassion and compassionate deeds are insufficient and they eagerly seek the wisdom of enlightenment, the majority of them will fall into the trap of self-liberation [that is, they gain only the fruition of the *Śrāvakayāna*]. In such circumstances, they have forgotten the underlying meaning of the *Mahāyāna*'s teachings on *prajñā*, which emphasizes the union of wisdom and compassion, and have created obstacles to their progression on the path to Buddhahood.

Third is the balance between tranquility and wisdom. When cultivating the *Mahāyāna* practices, if practitioners are biased toward meditation such that their power of tranquility is strong and wisdom is weak or if they are biased toward wisdom such that their wisdom is strong but their tranquility is weak, they will be unable to realize the profound nature of all dharmas and will be unable to accomplish true wisdom. This is because when the wisdom of differentiation and selection is strong and tranquility is insufficient, it is like a candle in the wind. Even though the light can illuminate, it flickers and can be extinguished easily. This is like the case of Venerable Ānanda. Although he is honored as foremost in learning the dharma, when the Buddha entered *parinirvāṇa*, Venerable Ānanda had yet to attain Arhatship. This is because he focused on the wisdom of learning but had a weak foundation in meditation.

However, if practitioners' tranquility is strong and their strength of wisdom is weak, they are not on the right path of Buddhist practice. This is because deep meditation can give rise to a unique form of stillness that results in an extremely sublime experience where the body and mind is filled with a sense of freedom, bliss, rapture, and joy. While experiencing such a wonderful state, they can easily become enchanted and contented, thus creating an obstacle to

³³ Experiencing life rationally can be highlighted from the following example. If a *Śrāvakayāna* practitioner sees people arguing, they would reflect rationally and conclude this is suffering, just as the Buddha taught. Their first reaction is less likely to contemplate how they could help to resolve the argument and bring happiness to all parties. This is the intended meaning of "experiencing life rationally."

seeking and attaining wisdom. Hence the *sūtras* and exegesis always mention that the deepest state of worldly meditation does not accord with wisdom and is unable to bring forth awakening.³⁴ Nāgārjuna says that bodhisattvas of the seventh *bhūmi*,³⁵ which is “called the stage of equilibrium between tranquility and wisdom,” have meditation and wisdom that is balanced, and only then do they attain thorough understanding of the truth regarding nonorigination. At this point, they can penetrate deeply into the truth and will no longer regress from the *Mahāyāna*.

Fourth is sameness of truth and wisdom is realized. When a practitioner attains the wisdom that engenders the realization of the profound truth relating to the nature of all dharmas, this is the arising of true wisdom. This state is conventionally described in terms of the duality of subject and object, where the subject is the wisdom that can bring about realization, and the object is the truth that is to be realized. However, when one experiences this state, where true wisdom awakens to the truth, they actually transcend duality.

Therefore, when a practitioner’s true wisdom awakens to the truth, the practitioner realizes the sameness of the truth and wisdom; the two become indistinguishable and inseparable. As said in the *sūtras* [in the state of realization], “there is no wisdom as subject that realizes the truth, and no truth as the object to be realized.”

The Merging of Compassion and Wisdom is Unique to the *Mahāyāna*

The above four aspects are the manifestation of true wisdom. Among them, the union of faith and wisdom, the balance between meditation and wisdom, and realization of the sameness of the truth and wisdom are common to the wisdom of the two-vehicles that are inclined toward the truth. Only the *Mahāyāna prajñā* has the unique aspect of the merging of compassion and wisdom.

The *Mahāyāna’s prajñā* is not an abstract wisdom that distinguishes between things, nor is it inclined toward a lifeless type of rationality. Rather, it possesses faith, compassion, deep tranquility, and profound clarity, and is fully imbued with the vitality of spiritual life. Therefore, the *Mahāyāna* wisdom that can bring about realization of the nature of all dharmas undeniably embodies boundless virtues, such as compassion and diligence. [This is also the case with the *dharmakāya*.] In the *Mahāyāna*, the underlying principle is to rely on this *prajñā* to end defilement and realize the truth, which is to attain the *dharmakāya*. The *dharmakāya* is the nature of boundless wholesome dharmas, or the nature that boundless wholesome dharmas rely on. This means that when *prajñā* realizes the truth, it too is equipped with boundless virtues. Therefore, the situation where a buddha realizes bodhi—

³⁴ The “deepest state of worldly meditation” refers to the state of “neither perception nor nonperception,” which is generally accepted by the various Indian religions of Buddha’s time to be the deepest state of meditation. This does not preclude some religions claiming to have even deeper states. In Buddhism, there is a deeper state of meditation that is beyond the worldly state, and only enlightened beings can reach this level.

³⁵ *Bhūmi* is a Sanskrit word which has the meaning of earth, ground, situation. It also has the meaning of a step, degree or stage in a metaphysical sense. It is taught that the final phase of the bodhisattva path consists of ten stages or ten *bhūmis*, which reflect the final ten levels before the attainment of Buddhahood. Bodhisattvas who have attained to these ten stages are extremely advanced practitioners.

that is, his attainment of the ultimate wisdom—is centered on wisdom, yet it includes all pure and wholesome dharmas.

With respect to the study and practice of wisdom, we must understand clearly its unique qualities as well as know that true wisdom must be supported by all virtues. For example, the scriptures say that *prajñā* embraces and guides all virtuous practices and that all virtuous practices enrich *prajñā*. In other words, at the same time as wisdom is being cultivated, faith, compassion, meditation, and so forth should also be cultivated and accumulated. Only then can true *prajñā* arise.

8. Categories of Wisdom

Wisdom Grouped into Threes

The nature and characteristics of all dharmas are very deep and varied. Therefore, in terms of the wisdom that can penetrate and understand these dharmas, there are different levels and types. [For example, there are different levels of wisdom based on the depth of understanding, and there are different types of wisdom depending on the aspects of phenomena or principle understood.] Here, the most important categories, which are repeatedly indicated in the Buddhist texts, are presented briefly. Wisdom can be considered tripartition, and there are several types of tripartite wisdom.

A. Wisdom Endowed at Birth, Wisdom of Engaged Effort, and True Wisdom

One of the commonly seen types of tripartite wisdom consists of the wisdom endowed at birth, the wisdom of engaged effort, and true wisdom.³⁶

Wisdom Endowed at Birth

The wisdom that is endowed at birth is innate wisdom. Every person—as it happens, every sentient being—possesses some wisdom. This is because all living sentient beings, as they go about their lives, have to some degree the ability to differentiate and discern things. Let us take humans as an example. No matter whether they are clever or foolish, honorable or disgraceful, in general, everyone is born with the ability to discern what is true and false, acceptable and unacceptable. This ability is the manifestation of wisdom that is endowed at birth. However, this wisdom endowed at birth requires certain subsequent conditions to nurture and support its development in our lives. For example, the education that we receive from our parents and teachers, the cultural influences in our society, even our own life experiences, and so on, are the conditions that help wisdom endowed at birth to develop and

³⁶ In the original Chinese text, true wisdom is 無漏慧, which literally means undefiled wisdom or wisdom that is undefiled. In Chinese, the words “defiled” and “undefiled” are added to indicate the state in which something occurs. When the word “undefiled” is used to modify wisdom, it indicates that the practitioner has cut off all afflictions and attained liberation. The adjective of defiled and undefiled may cause confusion for readers so they have been omitted in the English version.

expand. Only when these supporting conditions are present can the wisdom endowed at birth in human beings fully develop.

In this world, regardless of which ethnic group we belong to, each person possesses wisdom endowed at birth, so in this respect all humans are equal. However, to advance the knowledge of people in general, a good education and wholesome environment are needed. The so-called superior and inferior differences between ethnic groups are merely a result of the way in which wisdom endowed at birth has developed as a result of the conditions after birth. When we talk about the function of wisdom that develops after birth, it is merely a matter of whether or not that wisdom is manifest. It is not the case that the essence of that wisdom differs.

When we learn and practice the Buddha's teachings, either from listening to the *sūtras* and dharma teachings or from reading and investigating the teachings, we gain a certain level of understanding regarding the Buddha-dharma. Even if we can then teach about emptiness, existence, the mind, and true nature, or magnificently elaborate on the superior virtues of Buddhahood and its various states of nonobstruction, generally speaking, the type of wisdom that understands and can elaborate on the Buddha's teachings still belongs to the wisdom endowed at birth. This level of wisdom, more or less, is what the ordinary worldly type of wisdom can achieve. In other words, there is little difference between the [initial level of] wisdom based on Buddhist practices and ordinary wisdom based on worldly training. If a Buddhist practitioner remains at this stage, becomes contented with their attainment, and does not endeavor to advance, what they are then able to attain from the Buddha-dharma is merely an ordinary worldly type of wisdom. This is the case even if what they know and understand all relates to the Buddha-dharma.

The first step in the study and practice of the Buddha-dharma is to use our wisdom endowed at birth as a means to understanding the Buddha-dharma. Using our wisdom endowed at birth is a preliminary measure to enter the vast ocean of the Buddha-dharma. The wisdom endowed at birth is not the unique wisdom found in Buddhism; rather, it is the first step in practicing the Buddha-dharma.

Wisdom of Engaged Effort

There is a big difference between the wisdom of engaged effort and the wisdom endowed at birth. The wisdom of engaged effort involves a high level of understanding, discernment, investigation, and so on, and yet it is also based on strong faith and requires a period of wholehearted, solid practice. Subsequently, when the mind attains a level of purification, the wisdom of engaged effort arises. This type of wisdom arises purely because of the stimulation from the practice of the Buddha-dharma. The wisdom of engaged effort is not attainable from ordinary worldly understanding. In the Buddhist teachings, this wisdom is further split into three stages: these are the three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice.

The Three Wisdoms: Learning, Contemplation, Practice

To develop the wisdom of learning, we draw upon wisdom endowed at birth, associating with spiritual guides and learning the teachings time and again. Gradually, we develop the ability to understand the Buddha-dharma deeply. When the mind attains a level of purified faith, a state similar to awakening is initiated.³⁷ In such a state, we attain an even greater understanding of, and confidence in, the Buddha-dharma. This type of wisdom is attained from learning the Buddha-dharma; therefore, it is more appropriate to call it the wisdom resulting from learning. Beware! Do not be mistaken and think that by merely listening to some *sūtras* and having a little knowledge, the accomplishment of the wisdom of learning is attained. We should know that the wisdom of learning is a special type of wisdom that arises from a pure mind.³⁸ The ability of this special wisdom to understand and discern the Buddha-dharma is far superior to the ability of ordinary knowledge.³⁹

The wisdom of contemplation depends on the wisdom of learning as its foundation. The wisdom of contemplation can further contemplate, investigate, distinguish, and discern dharmas, such that our understanding of the nature of all dharmas and their various aspects, such as causes, conditions, and effects, becomes greater and deeper. This type of understanding, which arises from contemplation, is called the wisdom resulting from contemplation.

The wisdom of practice is founded on both the wisdom of learning and the wisdom of contemplation. With an understanding of all dharmas, which results from achieving the two former wisdoms, and with the mind in the meditative state of tranquility, this wisdom can further investigate and discern the true nature of all dharmas and the myriad aspects of dependent origination. This is a profound wisdom that arises when the mental practices of tranquility and insight can function simultaneously and harmoniously. Therefore, this is called the wisdom resulting from practice.⁴⁰

³⁷ In Buddhism faith has many levels. As a practitioner's wisdom develops their experience affirms their faith and this is the process of purification of faith. So faith in Buddhism is not a blind faith. For the sages who have attained awakening, their faith in the Buddha-dharma is called perfect confidence. This is because they have confirmed the Buddha's teachings with their own practice and realization. In our translation, the word faith is used to mean the different levels of faith held by practitioners who have yet to attain perfect confidence.

³⁸ Note that "pure mind" here does not refer to absolutely pure as with the sages, or imbued with tranquility (*śamatha*). Rather, it is referring to a relatively pure mind that is calm but is not yet at the stage of tranquility.

³⁹ In Buddhism the phenomenon of a person is split into the basics of the five aggregates (form, sensation, perception, mental activities, consciousness). These aggregates in turn are further split into many aspects. Wisdom and its functions are attributed to the aggregate of mental activities. The human as a whole merely manifests the functions that different mental activities perform. For example when a person discerns and investigates something, it is really the wisdom that is doing the investigation. Hence in this article it is the wisdom that possesses certain qualities and not the person.

⁴⁰ The wisdom of practice actually contains two elements. One is the progressive element, and the other is the accomplishment or perfection element. This is explained in further detail in Venerable Yinshun's work *The Way to Buddhahood* (pages 367–368 of the Chinese version).

Of the three wisdoms, the wisdom of learning is the initial stage, and its development relies on contemplation and understanding through the medium of language (names, terms, clauses, and sentences). Then, the wisdom of contemplation gradually moves toward the true meaning through further investigation and reflection upon the understanding gained from the wisdom of learning. Last, the wisdom of practice has a special definition; that is, it must be based on meditative tranquility to investigate the meaning of the dharma without relying on language. These three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice are collectively called the wisdom of engaged effort because these stages have not yet attained the first level of true realization.⁴¹

True Wisdom

After accomplishing the wisdom of practice, where tranquility and insight function simultaneously, we can then discern and investigate the dharma even more deeply and thoroughly. Eventually, true wisdom—also called the wisdom of true realization—will arise. With true wisdom, we can end our defilements and awaken to the truth. This is the true goal of developing wisdom. Nevertheless, from the perspective of practicing as a whole, it is inevitable that we initially rely on wisdom endowed at birth. Then, through the path of learning, contemplation, and practice—the stages in the wisdom of engaged effort—we are eventually able to attain this goal.

The Relationship between Wisdom Endowed at Birth, Wisdom of Engaged Effort, and True Wisdom

The path of developing wisdom is the same, whether practicing the *Mahāyāna* or the *Śrāvākayāna*. If we apply the Tiantai school's classification of the six identities concerning Buddha, wisdom endowed at birth is still at the stage of "identified as Buddha due to principle". The learning, contemplation, and practice stages in the wisdom of engaged effort correspond to "identified as Buddha through language", "identified as Buddha through contemplation", and "identified as Buddha due to resemblance" respectively. Only true wisdom corresponds to the stages of "identified as Buddha due to partial realization" and

⁴¹ The term "wisdom of engaged effort" is an attempt to reflect the meaning of the practices in the three wisdoms. These are, as yet, phases on the path of practice, and thus conscious effort to engage in practice is required.

“identified as Buddha due to ultimate realization”.⁴² Even though the realization of the profound truth is the function of true wisdom, it is impossible to attain realization of the profound truth without wisdom endowed at birth. Even more so, the wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice must not be absent. In other words, without the wisdom of learning, contemplation, and practice as a foundation, it is impossible for true wisdom to arise. Consequently, there is no possibility of ending defilement and realizing the truth. The goal of practicing the Buddha’s teachings is to use true wisdom to end defilement and achieve realization. To first gain true wisdom, we must rely on wisdom endowed at birth and go through the stages of the three wisdoms. This process of developing wisdom is a definitive teaching, not merely a process commonly found in the *sūtras* from ancient India. The teachings by ancient Chinese sages, such as Venerable Zhiyi of the Tiantai school, and others, do not contradict this process.

Therefore, beginners who are learning the Buddha’s teachings should take note of the following:

- First, do not mistake listening, reading, researching, and teaching the *sūtras* for the accomplishment of wisdom and consequently be easily contented or proud.
- Second, we must recognize that, even when we progress further and develop the wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and practice, these are merely the prerequisite practices for learning the Buddha’s teachings. We still have a long way to go before we reach the goal. Be careful! Do not develop the arrogance of thinking we have gained perfect awakening or are equal to the buddhas.
- Third, to attain true wisdom, we must not neglect the wisdom endowed at birth and the wisdom of engaged effort. In other words, we must not slight the value of repeated practice of the wisdoms, such as learning and contemplation.

⁴² The Tiantai school used the Buddha as a basis for the classification of stages and called this classification system “the six identities concerning Buddha.” The first stage is “identified as Buddha due to principle” and refers to the principle that all sentient beings possess Buddha’s nature, and therefore, in this respect, they are no different from buddhas. The second stage is “identified as Buddha through language,” which refers to those who learn from wise teachers or from the *sūtras*, and through the medium of language they understand that all phenomena are the dharma. Third is “identified as Buddha through contemplation.” After knowing that all phenomena are dharmas, one continues practicing according to the teachings in order to gain clear insight, where principles and wisdom align. At this point, the actions and speech of these practitioners are consistent, without contradiction. Fourth is “identified as Buddha due to resemblance.” At this stage, after attaining stage three, with further practice one’s wisdom becomes clearer and concentration becomes stronger such that the six senses are purified, and delusions arising from erroneous views and thinking ceases, while ignorance is tamed. At this point, one has yet to attain true realization, but the attainment is very similar. Fifth is “identified as Buddha due to partial realization.” This stage refers to the gradual ending of ignorance and the attainment of the middle way. Ignorance is grouped into forty-one grades, from the ten levels of abiding, practice, dedication, stages, and the stage of wonderful awakening. As each level is attained, the gradual ending of ignorance and attainment of the middle way is reflected. Sixth is “identified as Buddha due to ultimate realization.” This refers to the attainment of Buddhahood after overcoming all the various types of ignorance.

B. The Wisdom of Engaged Effort toward Nondiscrimination, Fundamental Wisdom of Nondiscrimination, and Derivative Wisdom of Nondiscrimination

Another system for categorizing wisdom is based on the nondiscriminative wisdom that realizes the nature of truth, which comprises the wisdom of engaged effort toward nondiscrimination, the fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination, and the derivative wisdom of nondiscrimination.⁴³ The wisdom of engaged effort toward nondiscrimination, which is the wisdom of engaged effort, refers to the wisdom that is still developing toward the realization of the truth. Next, the wisdom that realizes the truth and accords with the truth is called the fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination. Last, arising from this fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination is the derivative wisdom of nondiscrimination, which can thoroughly investigate and understand all dharmas.

C. Worldly Wisdom, Transcendental Wisdom, Perfect Transcendental Wisdom

Wisdom can also be categorized based on the progression from an ordinary being to a buddha, during which there are worldly wisdom, transcendental wisdom, and perfect transcendental wisdom. Worldly wisdom refers to the wisdom that can discern and investigate; worldly wisdom is possessed by ordinary beings and Buddhist practitioners who have yet to attain any awakened stage of the sages. Transcendental wisdom leads to transcendence from this world and can fully understand suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and selflessness, which are the characteristics of all dharmas.⁴⁴ Transcendental wisdom is the wisdom possessed by the sages of the two vehicles. Perfect transcendental wisdom is the unique wisdom of the *Mahāyāna*, which only the buddhas and bodhisattvas possess. Although this wisdom is transcendental, it penetrates the two truths without obstruction.⁴⁵ This means it can fully comprehend true nature and manifested appearances simultaneously. Due to its superiority over the wisdom of the two vehicles, which is inclined toward the realization of the ultimate truth only, it is called perfect transcendental wisdom.

This way of categorizing wisdom produces meanings very similar to those of three wisdoms categorized by Nāgārjuna in *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. In this teaching, Nāgārjuna talks about the heretical wisdom that leads to rebirth in higher realms, two-vehicle wisdom that is biased toward the truth, and the wisdom of the bodhisattvas.

⁴³ Here, this categorization is primarily used in the teachings of the Consciousness-only school. These three wisdoms all include the descriptor “nondiscrimination”; however, the first stage we have translated as the wisdom of engaged effort toward nondiscrimination because, at this stage, the realization of nondiscrimination is yet to be accomplished, whereas the fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination and the derivative wisdom of nondiscrimination are at the stages where awakening has been achieved.

⁴⁴ Transcendental wisdom can have two aspects. One aspect is its quality; that is, although this wisdom is not common to this world, it does exist in this world but is only possessed by the enlightened sages. The other aspect is its function; that is, this wisdom allows one to gain liberation from this world because it allows one to fully comprehend the truth of emptiness and so on.

⁴⁵ “Two truths” refers to the conventional truth relating to this world and the ultimate truth relating to the true nature of all dharmas.

D. Omniscience, Wisdom Regarding the Path, Buddha's Wisdom

In the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, wisdom is also grouped into “omniscience, wisdom of the aspects of the paths, and buddha’s wisdom.” This order reflects the difference in the wisdom of the three-vehicle sages: the *śrāvakas*, the bodhisattvas, and the buddhas.

The sages of the two vehicles, in essence, possess thorough realization of true nature—wisdom with which one knows the universal characteristic of all phenomena. They also possess the various aspects of all dharmas—wisdom with which one knows the myriad manifestations of phenomena. However, because these practitioners loathe worldly existence, they place greater emphasis on the wisdom with which one knows the universal characteristic of all phenomena, the true universal nature of all dharmas. Thus, their wisdom is referred to as omniscience.⁴⁶

The *Mahāyāna* bodhisattvas also possess two types of wisdom: the wisdom of the paths and the wisdom of the aspects of the paths. Their emphasis is on applying the wisdom, with which they awaken to the truth, into this worldly [life to benefit sentient beings]. This means that although they investigate emptiness, selflessness, et cetera so as to accord with true universal nature, they also undertake various practices and learn many paths to become proficient in the various aspects of all dharmas.⁴⁷ Bodhisattvas have deep compassion, which makes them determined to help all sentient beings. Therefore, they delight in learning many different practices, which is reflected in their vow, “Dharma practices are countless; I vow to learn them all.” A true practitioner of the bodhisattva path must focus on the wisdom of insight that encompasses all paths; thus, their wisdom is called the wisdom of the aspects of the paths.

The buddhas with supreme awakening can also be said to possess two wisdoms; these are omniscience and wisdom of all aspects of everything (buddha’s wisdom). Using countless practices of insight, buddhas perfectly penetrate the true nature of all dharmas and the countless appearances arising from cause and effect. Thus, they can penetrate both the conventional truth and the ultimate truth simultaneously without obstructions and exertion of effort. This wisdom is the most perfect, and it is therefore called buddha’s wisdom.

⁴⁶ The two-vehicle path’s omniscience is unlike a buddha’s omniscience. Two-vehicle sages only know everything in terms of the true nature of all phenomena. The buddha’s omniscience knows everything about all phenomena: their true nature, their manifested forms, and so on. In Nāgārjuna’s teaching *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, he clarifies that the two-vehicle path’s omniscience is only in name: as with a drawing of a lamp, there is the picture of a lamp but not the function of the lamp (Taisho volume 25, page 259, column a, lines 25-27). 《大智度論》卷 27：「佛一切智、一切種智，皆是真實。聲聞、辟支佛但有名字一切智；譬如畫燈，但有燈名，無有燈用。如聲聞、辟支佛，」（大正 25，259a25-27）

⁴⁷ In this teaching, “various aspects of all dharmas” generally refers to the five aggregates, twelve cognitive bases, eighteen perceptual elements, cause and effect concerning the cycle of birth and death, and so on. This is discussed later in section 9: Object of Contemplation for Insight Meditation. However, here, in the discussion of bodhisattva practices, “various aspects of all dharmas” places more emphasis on worldly life situations, such as understanding sentient beings’ needs and the required skills and knowledge to fulfill the task of benefiting sentient beings.

From these three ways of categorization found in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, we can see the difference in the characteristics of the three-vehicle's wisdom.

Wisdom Categorized into Pairs

In the scriptures, we also find many categorizations of wisdom into pairs.

A. The Wisdom of the Stability of Dharmas and Wisdom of Nirvana

First, looking at the *sūtras* of the *Śrāvakayāna*, there is the wisdom of the stability of dharmas and the wisdom of nirvana.⁴⁸ The *sūtras* say one must “first attain the wisdom of the stability of dharmas, and then the wisdom of nirvana is attainable.” The wisdom of the stability of dharmas is the skillful wisdom that can clearly understand how phenomena are established under the laws of cause and effect and dependent co-arising. What this means is that to penetrate the truth of all dharmas—suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and selflessness—and attain the transcendental state of nirvana, we must rely on the proper understanding of the various aspects of dharmas that are dependently originated and closely associated with sentient beings.

The ancient masters say, “Without relying on conventional truths, the ultimate truth is unattainable.” This reflects the same meaning because the ultimate truth is universal, without disparity, without differences, indeterminable, inconceivable, and indescribable. Only by relying on the wisdom with which one can understand conventional truths, and through gradual practice, is one able to penetrate the ultimate truth. What this means in terms of practicing the Buddha-dharma in this world is that we should not ignore the importance of understanding the various aspects of dharmas, such as cause and effect, dependent co-arising, and so on. If our practice focuses only on [cultivating] the wisdom of ultimate truth, we will easily fall into the incorrect path where we attach to the doctrines and slight wholesome deeds,⁴⁹ or we will fall into a state where we become attached to emptiness as an existing entity.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ The wisdom of the stability of dharmas is referring to stability in the sense of certainty or inevitability. This means that all dharmas or phenomena are subject to the law of cause and effect. Their intrinsic nature is certain to follow the laws of cause and effect. This certainty is the so-named “stability of dharmas.” The wisdom of nirvana is not just to know about nirvana and its characteristics and so on. Rather, this wisdom includes a personal ability to experience and realize nirvana.

⁴⁹ Practitioners that fall into this situation are not lazy per se; rather, they may be very diligent at the practice they adhere to. However, because they are fixated on the truth and on the doctrines on emptiness and completely mesmerized by the contemplation of the truth and its realization, they ignore the importance of phenomena in this world and place little importance on the practices that bring benefit to the beings in the world. These wholesome worldly deeds are also the causal seeds that ensure bodhisattvas ultimately realize the fruit of Buddhahood. The impetus for undertaking these wholesome deeds comes from a deep understanding of the law of cause and effect, dependent origination, and so on.

⁵⁰ In this second situation, the attachment to emptiness as real and existent is essentially the same as attaching to the self. While worldly beings attach to an “I” as being real, these practitioners know the “I” does not exist, but their unbalanced focus on the truth leads them to attach to the notion of emptiness as being an actual existent object.

B. Wisdom of Phenomena (Upāya) and Wisdom of Truth (Prajñā)

In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, a common pair is the wisdom of phenomena and wisdom of truth. These two types of wisdom have many synonyms. The more commonly known terms are *prajñā* (wisdom) and *upāya* (skillful means), which are transcriptions found in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. These two terms are translated as “wisdom” and “skillful means” in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*. When *prajñā* and *upāya*—or wisdom and skillful means—become mutually supportive and progress each other, they can reveal the wondrous function of liberation from fetters. Therefore, the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* states, “Wisdom without skillful means is fettered; skillful means without wisdom is fettered. Wisdom with skillful means is liberation, and skillful means with wisdom is liberation.” These two wisdoms are also called wisdom of the paths and wisdom of the aspects of the paths. The Consciousness-only school generally refers to them as fundamental wisdom and derivative wisdom. Other synonyms include wisdom and knowledge, true wisdom and skillful wisdom, wisdom of realizing the truth and wisdom of knowing all phenomena. These ways of categorization are very important in the *Mahāyāna* bodhisattva practice.

The ultimate true nature of all dharmas is naturally without disparity, without any differentiation, indeterminable, and inconceivable. However, in terms of our path of cultivation toward awakening, the objects to be investigated and understood can be grouped into two categories. One category is the real, ultimate nature, and the other is the diversity of conventional phenomena. The real, ultimate nature is the universal emptiness within all phenomena, which is also called the nature of nonarising or cessation or the nature of cessation. The diversity of conventional phenomena is the innumerable different phenomena: all the different manifestations of causes and effects flowing from dependent co-arising, or the multitude of differences among sentient beings and their worlds. Accordingly, it is said that the wisdom of bodhisattvas possesses both *prajñā* (wisdom) and *upāya* (skillful means). Regarding these two types of wisdom possessed by bodhisattvas, in terms of the ultimate truth and conventional phenomena, as explained above, *prajñā* is to realize true nature and *upāya* is to fully understand the manifestations of all phenomena. In terms of our own liberation and the liberation of others, *prajñā* reflects the self-realization of emptiness [that leads to liberation], whereas *upāya* reflects the skillful means to guide others to liberation. These are the two marvelous functions of the *Mahāyāna* wisdom.

Nevertheless, in the state of the ultimate truth, there is only the truth that is nondual, also called the truth without diversity. There is essentially no separation between ultimate and conventional or between truth and phenomena. Therefore, there is only the wisdom of *prajñā*. The wisdom of skillful means or derivative wisdom is merely the marvelous use of *prajñā* after it has been attained. This is why Kumārajīva uses gold as a simile to explain how these two wisdoms differ but are the same [in essence]: *prajñā* is like pure gold, and skillful means are like the artifacts made from the pure gold. When cultivating the Buddha-dharma, once realization is attained, the fundamental wisdom (*prajñā*) is attained and one awakens to

emptiness. Afterward, there arises the derivative wisdom (*upāya*), which deeply understands dependent co-arising and enables one to make the buddha lands sublime and bring sentient beings to enlightenment. Thereafter, fundamental wisdom and derivative wisdom gradually merge, mutually supporting each other's progress until they become perfect and function simultaneously. This is the perfect and ultimate wisdom of the middle path in Buddhism.

Other Types of Groupings

Apart from the three and two types of wisdom [groupings] discussed above, the *sūtras* and exegeses have other groupings of wisdom. There are the “eight receptivities and eight knowledges” of the training stages of the *Śrāvakayāna* sages,⁵¹ and the wisdom of exhausting defilements and the wisdom of the nonarising of defilements of the arhats. Moreover, regarding the wisdom at the stage of Buddhahood in the *Mahāyāna*, the Consciousness-only school arranges wisdom into the Buddha's wisdom of accomplishing deeds, Buddha's wisdom of pristine insight, Buddha's wisdom of equality, and Buddha's wisdom of great perfection.⁵² Esoteric Buddhism adds [to the Consciousness-only school's four groupings] the wisdom of the fundamental nature of the universe to form the five wisdoms of Buddhahood (where the wisdom of pristine insight and wisdom of equality are attainable by the bodhisattvas). Then, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra on the Benevolent King's Rule of the Country* says that from the bodhisattva stages to the attainment of Buddhahood, there are five receptivities.

Summary

In the Buddha-dharma, there are various categories of wisdom based on different meanings and stages. Although these categories are many, even countless, essentially what the practitioner realizes is the ultimate nature of phenomena and, conversely, that there is only one true wisdom with which we awaken to the truth. With this true wisdom, we can accord with the truth until we attain the highest stage of accomplishment, which is perfect and unobstructed.

(To be continued in Part 2)

⁵¹ These eight receptivities and knowledges are pairs of wisdom that reflect the progressive development of wisdom of the *Śrāvakayāna* sages while they are in their training phase. These eight pairs encompass the training stage from the first fruit up to, but not including, the final attainment of Arhatship. The “eight receptivities” refers to one's cognitive ability to fully accept a doctrine even before one has acquired or realized the knowledge pertaining to that doctrine. According to the *abhidharma*, receptivity is the moment that occurs immediately before realizing the knowledge. (For more information, see *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, Sanskrit-English Glossary, s.v. *kṣānti*, by Bhikkhu K. L. Dhammajoti.)

⁵² These four types of wisdom belonging to the buddhas are paired with the purification of the eight consciousnesses in the Consciousness-only school. Upon the attainment of Buddhahood, the first five consciousnesses of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body become the Buddha's wisdom of accomplishing deeds; the sixth consciousness of the mind transforms into the Buddha's wisdom of pristine insight; the seventh consciousness becomes the Buddha's wisdom of equality; and the eighth consciousness develops into the wisdom of great perfection.