

Wisdom

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Wisdom—in Sanskrit *buddhi*—arises in us whenever the quality of *sattva* grows stronger in the mind. *Sattva*, which literally means “being-ness” (from *sat* “being” and *tva* “-ness”), is one of the three primary qualities (*guna*) composing Nature or *prakriti*. It stands for the principle of lucidity or transparency, as it manifests in wisdom. *Sattva* reflects the Spirit (*âtman*), which is superconscious, more faithfully than the other two qualities of Nature

The other two qualities are *rajas* (the dynamic principle) and *tamas* (the principle of inertia). According to Yoga and its cousin tradition Sâmkhya, everything that exists in the universe is a combination of these three qualities. Thus compared to the body, which represents chiefly the principle of inertia, the emotions are primarily governed by the dynamic principle, while the mind is preeminently a manifestation of the principle of lucidity.

However, the mind is not pure *sattva* but, like everything within the realm of Nature, a composite of the three primary qualities. Thus there are as many shades of mental lucidity as there are human beings (or living creatures in general). Even in a single day, our individual mind undergoes a series of qualitative changes that correspond to the relative preponderance of one primary quality over another. For instance, the waking state contains overall more *sattva* than the dream state, which has a predominance of *rajas*, while deep sleep shows a preeminence of the principle of inertia. Or, to give another example, when we are peaceful and calm, our mind is governed primarily by *sattva*; when we are agitated, our mind is ruled by *rajas*, and when we feel bored and dull, *tamas* predominates.

The Sanskrit term *buddhi* mentioned above stands both for “wisdom” and the organ of wisdom, that is, the higher mind. The lower mind (*manas*) is bound to the physical senses, which supply it with an incessant stream of information that it then processes to produce knowledge. The higher mind is supraphysical and is traditionally compared to a polished mirror that reflects the light of Consciousness (*cit*) more faithfully than the lower mind. When the light of Consciousness or transcendental Awareness falls into the higher mind, wisdom is produced.

This is a particular kind of knowing, which relates not so much to the finite world of physical or psychological realities but to the Spirit or Consciousness. At the level of the intellect, wisdom can be said to augment Awareness in us. At the level of feelings, wisdom generates such elevated states as universal love, compassion, kindness, patience, tolerance, and other similar virtues. At the level of values, wisdom is responsible for our concern with the ideal of goodness, beauty, and harmony. Not least, the presence of wisdom creates in us the urge toward self-understanding, self-discipline, self-transcendence, and, ultimately, Self-realization. In other words, the impulse toward freedom and liberation, or enlightenment, becomes manifest in us when wisdom harmonizes the otherwise turbulent mind. More than that, wisdom is the means by which liberation or enlightenment is made possible.

Whatever yogic path we may follow, all paths unfold through wisdom. Even Bhakti-Yoga, the spiritual discipline of self-surrender to the Divine Being, relies on the liberating power of wisdom. For before we can practice self-surrender, we must first determine—through applied wisdom—the proper object of our devotion. Otherwise we could end up worshipping “false gods” or confuse the self (ego) with the Self. Our emotions are notoriously unreliable if left to their own devices; they require the light of intelligence in the form of wisdom.

Or, how could we practice Karma-Yoga, the yogic path of self-transcending day-to-day action, without having wisdom tell us what course of action is appropriate in any given case?

The cultivation of wisdom is clearly a priority on the spiritual path. Since wisdom is a function of the presence of *sattva*, we can invite wisdom to manifest in us through any and all activities that enhance *sattva* in our body and mind: Eating pure and wholesome food, keeping the body healthy through appropriate exercise and other habits, entertaining pure and wholesome thoughts, engaging in virtuous actions, remaining attentive in all situations, speaking kind and helpful words and otherwise practicing silence (*mauna*), cultivating self-observation, self-understanding, and self-discipline, focusing on that which matters rather than scattering our energy and attention, developing concentration and meditation, cultivating a joyful mood, conquering doubt through faith (*shraddha*) in ourselves, the process of self-transformation, the ideal of liberation, and the great teachings and teachers.

The more we foster the *sattva* quality in ourselves, the more wisdom will guide us in making the right choices in all areas of life. Whereas the self-divided mind lacking in wisdom is typically problem oriented, wisdom always offers “natural,” plausible solutions. Wisdom puts us in the flow of things. By contrast, the unwise mind experiences itself as immersed in a hostile environment that must be fought and conquered. Wisdom shows us that there is nothing to conquer. Nature is not our enemy. Only our false sense of being a limited ego-personality encased by a limited body gives us this illusion, which is the source of all our pain and suffering (*duhkha*).

Wisdom is not about yet another piece of information that has to be judged and either accepted or rejected; rather it gives us a view of the whole situation and thus shows us a way out of all dilemma or conflict. Wisdom is marked by wholeness and happiness.

Therefore let us cultivate *sattva* in everything we do, say, and think so that wisdom may illuminate the path before us.

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