

Why Wisdom is Like the Great Ocean

Theme: The nature of wisdom and the path to wisdom

This is what we have been told. On one occasion the Buddha and his followers were staying near Savatthi in the Eastern Park at the mansion belonging to Migara's mother. Ananda, his main assistant, asked the Buddha to recite and bless the Rules for leading a Good and Proper Life: kindness, generosity, contentment, truthfulness and careful concentration. The Buddha was about to recite and bless the Rules when he suddenly said, 'I think there is someone here who in his heart is not keeping to the Rules, so I can't do the blessing.' And indeed, there *was* in the room one of the followers who was not, in his heart, keeping to the Rules. He was asked to leave. And when he had been led out the Buddha gave his teaching about how wisdom is like the great ocean, as follows.

'The great ocean has eight wonderful and marvellous qualities:

1. The great ocean becomes deeper very gradually, not suddenly.
2. The great ocean is stable; it stays within the limits of the high-tide line.
3. If there is a dead body in the great ocean it gets washed up onto the shore.
4. When the great rivers, like the Ganges, the Yamuna and the Sarubhu, flow into the ocean they cease to be individual rivers with their own names and their own waters and just become part of the great ocean.
5. Although all the rivers of the world flow into the great ocean and the rain drops into it from the sky, the level of the ocean does not rise or fall but stays the same.
6. The great ocean always everywhere has just one taste – the taste of salt.
7. The great ocean contains precious things such as pearls, coral, crystal, ruby, gold and silver.
8. The great ocean is the dwelling place of many wonderful creatures that are hard to imagine, like whales, serpents and beautifully-coloured gigantic fishes.

'These are the eight wonderful and marvellous qualities of the ocean.

'Now,' the Buddha continued, 'there are eight wonderful and marvellous qualities in our Dharma wisdom teachings, that are like the wonderful and marvellous qualities of the ocean:

1. Just as the ocean gets deeper very gradually, not suddenly; in the same way, people make progress in Dharma wisdom through a series of small steps, they don't acquire wisdom suddenly in a single instant.
2. Just as the ocean is stable and stays within the limits of the high-tide line; in the same way, people seeking the Dharma wisdom do not break any of the Rules for leading a Good and Proper life: kindness, generosity, contentment, truthfulness and careful concentration.
3. Just as dead bodies in the ocean are washed up onto the shore; in the same way, those who in their hearts are not keeping to the Rules for leading a Good and Proper Life are asked to leave the assembly of those seeking wisdom.
4. Just as the great rivers flow into the ocean lose their individual names and become part of the great ocean; in the same way, people of all types of family (rich, poor, different castes, different races) lose their previous identities and all become equal when they take part in the search for wisdom.
5. Just as the level of the ocean does not rise or fall even though many great rivers flow into it and rain drops into it from the sky; in the same way, although many people achieve wisdom by following their own path, the nature of wisdom itself stays exactly the same, perfect and unchanging.
6. Just as the great ocean always everywhere, has one just one taste – the taste of salt; in the same way, the great Dharma wisdom always everywhere has just one taste – the taste of freedom.
7. Just as the great ocean contains precious things such as pearls, coral, ruby, gold and silver; in the same way, the great wisdom teachings contain precious things such as: the method for training in kindness, the method for training in contentment, the method for training in concentration, and the methods for finding the path to Nirvana – peace, wisdom and joy.
8. Just as the ocean is the dwelling place of many wonderful creatures that are hard to imagine, like whales, serpents and beautifully-coloured gigantic fishes; in the same way the great wisdom is the dwelling place of women

and men whose holiness and understanding are so great that they are hard to imagine or understand.

'These are the eight wonderful and marvellous qualities of the Dharma wisdom teachings,' said the Buddha, 'which are like the wonderful and marvellous qualities of the ocean.'

Questions

1. What are some of the ways in which the Buddha compares wisdom and the ocean?
2. Do you agree that wisdom arrives in a series of small steps, rather than suddenly all at once?
3. Do you think that those who secretly, in their hearts, were not keeping the Rules for a Good and Proper Life should have been asked to leave the assembly of people seeking wisdom?
4. In what ways does wisdom always have 'the taste of freedom'?

Dharma Issues:

- *The nature of Enlightenment*
- *The nature of the path to Enlightenment*

Based on the Uposatha Sutta, in The Udana, Buddhist Publication Society, 1997, Sutta 5.5