

## The Five Insights, Part 1: Insight of Language and Culture

Good morning everyone! This is today's Dharma Espresso on the five insights, part 1: insight of language and culture.

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Somebody asked me: "On the vertical path, which is the spiritual path, we have to practice meditation, concentration, and enlightened wisdom (prajna paramita). On the horizontal path, we have to open our heart to cultivate kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, so that our heart will embrace more and more people. I understand these concepts. But what about the spiral path? Do I need to cultivate this path--the beauty-oriented path? This path involves learning a lot of subjects, so I prefer not to cultivate it. I only want to practice meditation. On what basis do you say there is such a spiral path?"

If you have read General Buddhism, Book 1, you should have heard about the five insights. What are the five insights? They are the five kinds of knowledge (five sciences) that the Buddha said we should acquire. In the Discourse of the Stages of Yogic Practice (Yogacarabhumi-sastra), Book 38, it is said that the five insights are five kinds of knowledge that all bodhisattvas should have. It is the path of the bodhisattva. But if you say: "No! I want to cultivate the path of purification, the leaving-the-world path, to reach nirvana and liberation." In this case you do not need to talk about the five insights. But if you want to follow the bodhisattva path, then the five insights have been traditionally practiced. Before the Buddha, Brahmins already talked about these five insights because they are very necessary to our life. What are they?

1. Insight of language and culture
2. Insight of spirituality
3. Insight of logic and science
4. Insight of medicine
5. Insight of fine arts and technology

Let me explain them to you in a few minutes; if we do not have enough time, we will continue tomorrow.

Insight of language and culture is the clarity and knowledge about language, sounds, how people communicate, and how to understand their intentions. We know where their words lead and the different ways they say things. If some people say something in poetry, we know their underlying meaning and how they arrange their words.

If we have this insight, we can learn Vietnamese, English, French, Chinese, Japanese, all kinds of languages. The ability to learn languages is also the ability to understand sounds, which is the means of communication between humans. You can communicate with others by phone and the communication would definitely be through sounds.

Sounds express emotions, feelings, thoughts, and even a mental sphere. This means that the entire universe of thought, thinking, and knowledge all lie in the sounds we produce. So language is very important.

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In Yoga, sound is held in the highest value. It is thought that the entire universe can be condensed in one sound, the sound OM. When an instrument is used to measure the frequencies of the sound OM, we can see the shape this sound generates. It has a pattern of a mandala composed of 47 triangles piled up in a very special way. The OM mandala is the mandala of the universe, meaning this universe can be embedded in one sound.

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Sometimes through a sound, we can express a lot of emotions, and a word can carry so many meanings and a lot of history. If we do not understand the culture from which the word comes, we will not understand what the sound means. So when we speak of insight of language and culture, we are talking about cultures. Our understanding of cultures is very important.

For example, if you come from the South, you will see that culture in the North is different when you go there. If you are a Vietnamese going to the United States, the American culture is different from yours. Culture differs in spoken words. Apart from gestures and actions, people put in the spoken sound their emotions, their love, and all kinds of things. Gestures and actions are limited in conveying meanings.

So you understand now that the insight of language and communication is the clarity through the deep knowledge of sounds, language, and culture. That's why practitioners of the bodhisattva path read everything, know everything, understand everything, and know several languages to understand others' cultures.

You will say: That's why I travel several times every year. No, it may not be the same. Travelling abroad does not mean that you are going for the sake of learning other cultures. You may go for your own pleasure, for shopping, for business purposes, or to be able to boast that you've been there and done that. You may travel to show people that you have gone to many places and that you know a lot. So travelling does not lead to insight of language and culture necessarily.

This insight is the deep understanding, not only of language, but also of the culture behind this language. So when you talk to your children, you should be careful, because your words not only convey your emotions, feelings, and culture, but also all your history. If you want your children to have a deep understanding and vast knowledge, you should talk to them using extensive vocabulary and expressions instead of simple language.

The same applies in marital relationships. If you communicate using limited vocabulary, you will see that your relation will not be very deep. In conversation, your opinion and world view should be more and more open. Also, the language you use must be more and more profound. Without deep meanings, your spouse or children cannot think deeply. Sometimes languages are very special, because the words we use carry emotions, history, knowledge, and culture deep inside.

Today we only talked about the insight of language and culture. There are four other insights: of spirituality, logic and science, medicine, and fine arts and technology, which we will cover tomorrow. So today, let's do some homework. Let's look into the vocabulary you use today to see how deep it is. Listen to others' speech to understand their embedded motives and emotions, their purpose, their potential and power. Do their words affect us? Do they appeal to us or break our heart? Do they break us down, or build us up to become a bodhisattva?

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If you are cultivating the bodhisattva path, your words should always uplift people; they should be inviting, not repelling; they should not break people down but fulfill them and enrich them. They should always transcend toward beauty and goodness. That is why all bodhisattvas should cultivate how to use words, speech, and culture, because these are expedient means for the insight of language and culture.

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Thank you for listening. I wish you a peaceful, happy, and awakened day.

**Dharma Master Heng Chang**

*Translated by Kim Chi and edited by Hoang-Tam.*

*Question or comment, please send email to [css.translators@gmail.com](mailto:css.translators@gmail.com).*