



Manchester
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Centre

Buddhism Level 2

The Five Spiritual Faculties

Week 1 – Introduction



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Over the next six weeks we shall be looking in some detail at the Five Spiritual Faculties, which are a useful model for **how to live with more awareness**. In other words, the teaching of the Spiritual Faculties can help us to engage with life more fully, deeply and enthusiastically. The original, Sanskrit term that relates to the Spiritual Faculties is *indriyas* – this word can also be translated as ‘senses’ (when applied to our physical bodies), or ‘governing principles’. Bearing both of these translations in mind, we can say that the *indriyas* are those parts of our makeup that govern our interactions with the world.

Four of the five Faculties can be seen as two pairs of opposite qualities in our personalities, namely:

- **Faith** and **Wisdom**
- **Energy** and **Concentration**

As individuals, we might have a tendency to be stronger in respect of one of each pair than the other – for example, we may enjoy developing our intellectual appreciation of the wisdom of the Buddha’s teaching, but find it difficult to develop faith, or even to understand what that quality entails. Similarly, we may be full of drive and energy in our exploration of the Buddhist life, but have trouble developing concentration, in our meditation or in life generally. Where a perfect balance between all 4 faculties would be ideal, the normal situation is that we have a bias towards two of them, perhaps at the expense of the other two.

This dynamic can be illustrated by the ancient symbol of the double vajra. A vajra is a ritual implement that can be seen as representing a thunderbolt, or simply reality. We can think of the individual, crossed vajras as the two pairs of faculties:



We can also imagine that the balance we’re seeking can be described as the double vajra being perfectly horizontal from the point of view of its central hub – in a sense, the latter acts as a pivot around which the pairs can tip in one

direction or the other. This pivot, in turn, represents the fifth (and crucial) faculty of **Mindfulness**. Mindfulness, or awareness, is the faculty that allows us to monitor and regulate where we stand in relation to the other four. If we are sufficiently aware of our individual dispositions, and of our changing mental states, we can apply ourselves more emphatically to those faculties in which we are relatively lacking.

This is what Sangharakshita poetically writes about the need to balance the Spiritual Faculties:

Between the members of each group (of faculties) there must be perfect harmony. A devotee in whom faith is strong but wisdom weak will speedily fall victim to blind credulity, dogmatism, bigotry and zeal for persecution. One in whom, on the contrary, wisdom is in full flower while faith is still in the bud will soon become a prey to no less blind rationalism, as well as to scepticism, cunning, chicanery and intellectual arrogance. Similarly, superabundance of vigour in combination with feebleness of concentration will lead to restlessness, instability and mere aimless activity, while the opposite condition, that of great power of concentration but little energy, is on the other hand apt to result in indolence and inertia.

He goes on to say of the role of mindfulness in balancing the pairs:

This equalization can be brought about only by means of mindfulness, the one faculty which does not go to extremes, of which there cannot be too much, and which therefore requires no counterbalancing faculty.

(A Survey of Buddhism, Chapter 3 part 2)

In conclusion, we can say that the Five Spiritual Faculties give us an important model for developing greater awareness of ourselves and our habitual tendencies, then making an effort to develop whatever aspects of our 'mix' are initially weak. We can also see this as a practice of **integration** – in other words, drawing together some of the aspects of ourselves that can initially be remarkably separate. Maybe a good image for this is the segments of an orange, some of which have been separated from the rest, but which can still be slotted back into place to form a well-rounded whole!

In order to nurture the Spiritual Faculties, we need a supportive set of conditions (as we can appreciate in terms of the key Buddhist teaching of conditionality). Suitable conditions must include some key factors – positive circumstances in our social environment, the warmth of spiritual friendship, intellectual clarity about the Buddha's key teachings and being constantly exposed to the pure 'rain of the Dharma'.

In the following five weeks we shall be looking at each of the faculties in turn. If you'd like some supporting reading, in addition to the weekly course handouts, we suggest chapter 9 of '**What is the Dharma**' by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications). For a more scholarly study, try chapter 3 (section 2) of Sangharakshita's famous '**A Survey of Buddhism**' (also Windhorse Publications).