



Buddhism Level 2

The Five Spiritual Faculties

Week 4 - Energy



In the last two weeks we've been looking at the 'pair' of faculties, Faith and Wisdom. We've seen how we need to cultivate them individually as components of our spiritual lives, but also need to beware of allowing either one of them to become developed in a one-sided way, without the counterbalancing benefits of the other. We'll now begin to look at the second pair of faculties, Energy and Concentration – beginning with Energy (*Virya* in Sanskrit, sometimes also translated as 'vigour' in English).

Perhaps the first point to make is that it's very significant that energy (or effort) should be seen as part of the Buddhist interpretation of the spiritual path. There is a popular view of Buddhism in the west that its practitioners are predominantly gentle, retiring, possibly even a little passive. In reality this is a very unbalanced view – the spiritual life, if lived seriously, is definitely not an easy option. As Sangharakshita says, "The spiritual life is not an armchair life Buddhism is for people who are prepared to make an effort, who are prepared to try". This argument is supported over and over again by traditional texts from all the Buddhist schools which stress how testing the spiritual life can be. At the same time, its rewards are huge, as long as the person following the spiritual path is prepared to make an effort and try. To use a metaphor, we must be prepared to get up again every time we fall down. Therefore, we can say that Energy is a general requirement for all aspects of the spiritual life. What's more, Sangharakshita talks of two aspects of energy – one 'objective' and the other 'subjective'. The *objective* aspect involves doing things to help others, usually in a practical sense. This work may involve a considerable amount of effort, whether physical, intellectual or emotional, and may also be difficult or inconvenient.

The *subjective* aspect of Energy concerns making an effort to work on our own mental conditions. This aspect appears in the famous model of the **Noble Eightfold Path**, in which it features as Right Effort. What then do the traditional *suttas* (discourses of the Buddha) have to say about this? Maybe the best known of the Buddha's teachings on Right Effort breaks it into the **Four Exertions** (or Four Great Efforts). These are exercises that we should apply to our minds, in order to steer them systematically away from unskillful mental states and towards more skillful ones. (As Buddhism tends to avoid the labels 'bad' and 'good', the notions of 'unskillful' and 'skillful' can instead be used to indicate things, or practices, that are unhelpful or helpful to spiritual development, respectively.)

Firstly, we can act to *prevent the arising of unarisen unskillful mental states*. In other words, we try to protect our minds from developing new emotions and thoughts that are unhelpful. As the entry of such states into our minds takes place through the senses (as we have noted on earlier Buddhism courses), a

practice we can use to help prevent this happening is called **guarding the gates of the senses**. We make an effort not to react automatically to stimuli that reach us through seeing, hearing, reading, feeling (etc.), trying to not to manifest either attraction or aversion, or to absorb a message that distorts the truth of how things really are. This last point is a hugely important one in modern society where electronic media are so powerful and ever-present in our lives.

Secondly, we work to *eradicate arisen unskillful mental states* – in other words, emotions, thoughts, habits and tendencies that we realise we already possess, but which are unhelpful. We are often dominated by one of the **Five Hindrances** (this is often taught in relation to meditation, but can just as easily apply to life in general). The 5 hindrances are: (1) desire for sensual pleasure, (2) hatred, (3) restlessness and anxiety, (4) sloth and torpor, and (5) doubt and indecision. It can be very helpful to try to identify which of these we are subject to, either in our meditation, or more habitually in our lives in general.

Thirdly, we try to *develop unarisen skillful mental states*. In other words, we make a point of deliberately cultivating those experiences that have a positive quality. The various meditation techniques of the Buddhist tradition are very helpful in this undertaking. These include (1) the *Metta Bhavana* and the closely associated practices of cultivating (2) *compassion* (metta's response to the suffering in the world), (3) *unselfish joy* (when metta meets others' happiness or success) and (4) *equanimity* (recognising the inevitable effects on us of conditionality and responding to them without becoming intoxicated with the 'highs' or depressed by the 'lows').

Lastly, we can work to *maintain arisen skillful mental states*. As it is so easy to lose momentum in our spiritual practice, it is important that we establish good habits, like keeping up our attention to the observance of the precepts, having a creative approach to our meditation and continuing to study and absorb the core teachings of the Buddha.

