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Buddhist
Centre

Buddhism Level 2

The Five Spiritual Faculties

Week 5 - Concentration



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Last week we began to look at a second 'pair' of qualities, Energy and Concentration, and saw how the first of these is very much a requirement for our spiritual development. This week we look at a fourth faculty, Concentration, which can be regarded as the **focused** application of the faculty of energy.

A dictionary definition of concentration in its broad sense is 'the mental faculty of exclusive attention'. This suggests that we are fully focused on an object, or on our intended outcome, but this doesn't suggest any spiritual or even positive context. There is a more specific interpretation of concentration when we are concerned with the spiritual life – so how can we understand it?

If we regard this type of concentration as effectively the same thing as meditation, then we shall remember that it makes up a third of the all-important **Threefold Path**. However, there is quite a lot we can say specifically about concentration. One interesting observation Sangharakshita makes is that concentration can be seen as very closely related to happiness (that elusive state of mind that we wish for ourselves and others in the Metta Bhavana!). He suggests that, when we are fully concentrated we are truly happy, and that only when we are happy can we achieve proper concentration. This implies that concentration is vitally important to our spiritual life, and is certainly not just some technicality of Buddhist language.

The Sanskrit word for concentration is *samadhi*, which literally means the fixation of the mind on a single object. Technically, *samadhi* is seen as having 2 components: **recollection** of our purpose and **continuity** of that purpose. However, it would be a mistake to see this concentration coming about by forced effort. A more helpful point of view is that, when our bodies and minds begin to calm during meditation, our various energies become more **integrated**. This is different from our normal psychological situation, in which our energies are markedly divided between the different 'compartments' that, in a sense, make up our lives. To understand this, you might consider the slightly strange situation of finding yourself, at the same time, with a random selection of people from quite different aspects of your life – for example, a family member, a neighbour and a colleague. We might recognise that, in this situation, we're used to behaving quite differently in these different contexts – almost, in a sense, being a number of different people. Although this is very normal, it can also limit our happiness and our spiritual development. For this reason, integration has a very important place in the Buddhist path – whether through practising meditations like the Mindfulness of Breathing, or by various practices outside of meditation with an integrating effect. These can include more open communication, taking the time to go on retreats, cultivating our connections with the arts and, of course, studying the Dharma.

When the artificial divisions in our psychological makeup begin to break down in meditation, strong feelings of both physical and emotional pleasure can result. For example, we might have feelings of physical exhilaration like goose-pimples or hairs standing on end, or emotional experiences of mild euphoria or even ecstasy. In the Buddhist tradition these unusual experiences are not seen as important in their own right, or things that we should deliberately chase after – they're just a by-product of increasing integration. In fact, it sometimes happens that people who are new to meditation have such experiences early on, but before long these subside (sometimes known as 'beginners' mind'). However, this doesn't mean that meditation is no longer having an effect – in fact, it's likely that the work of integration is now going on at a deeper level.

According to Buddhist thinking, there are actually two types of integration. The first, known as **horizontal** integration, consists of the breaking down of divisions in our characters, as has already been described. Change of this type begins to loosen the effect of the hindrances (which we've already described last week). This involves a release of psychological tension, which is why we may have a strong experience of energy becoming newly available.

The second type of integration is known as **vertical** – this is because, as Kamalashila says in his book 'Meditation' (Windhorse), "we are getting into contact with our heights and our depths – we are discovering our heavens and our hells". People who experience this sort of change often describe long-forgotten experiences 'coming up' unexpectedly in their meditation. These experiences may be from much earlier in life, may be striking or apparently obscure, and may have either a pleasurable or painful character. They may even sometimes be 'visionary' and feature images of mythical beings, like those described as 'archetypes' by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung in the early 20th century.

In the broader context of *samadhi*, we sometimes talk in terms of a raised level of consciousness called **access concentration**. (In some ways this is fairly unremarkable – it seems that anybody can enter it in favourable circumstances, and it's not dramatically different from ordinary consciousness.) It's given this name because it's the point of access to those significantly raised levels of consciousness that are often described by the Sanskrit word *dhyana*. We can tell when we've entered access concentration because the hindrances seem to become noticeably weaker, and concentration therefore becomes noticeably easier. As Kamalashila says, "We will still experience some distractions, but these will not exert a strongly *emotional* pull, as do the five hindrances". This stage of meditation is important because the relative absence of distraction makes available still more energy, which can be used to sharpen our awareness still further and move onto the *dhyanas* (for more about these, try chapter 4 of Kamalashila's book).

Of course, we need to remember that we can't just pursue concentration on its own. Rather, it needs to be balanced with its 'opposite' faculty, energy, in order to avoid just staying in a sort of blissful laziness, without making an effort in developing our awareness.