



Buddhism Level 2

The Five Spiritual Faculties

Week 6 - Mindfulness



Over the last few weeks we have been looking at the individual components of the Five Spiritual Faculties, and how they can be regarded as acting in complementary pairs – Faith as the complement to Wisdom and Concentration as the complement to Energy. We have now reached the fifth faculty of Mindfulness, which we can also translate as ‘awareness’. As we originally observed, this is the faculty through which we are able to keep these other pairs of faculties in balance. The important point here is that we need to observe and understand our own makeup and tendencies in order to appreciate in which direction we need to work at any given time. For example, if we find that we are being ‘heady’ and intellectual in our approach we might place more emphasis on cultivating faith. If we are being a ‘headless chicken’ (i.e. too energetic) we may focus more on concentration.

This ability to be aware, whether of ourselves or other people or things, doesn’t come naturally, as we will no doubt have noticed. Most of the time we have a tendency to act impulsively – as Sangharakshita says, our “desires are immediately translated into deeds” in our attempts to gain what we desire or to avoid what we dislike. Constantly seeking gratification here and now we become victims and hostages to petty cravings and desires. We **forget** what we thought we were engaged in because we are easily **distracted** from it – we are distracted because our **concentration** is weak – and we have weak concentration because we have no **continuity of purpose**.

It is interesting that concentration, one of the other spiritual faculties, appears in this sequence – clearly there is a close relationship between it and mindfulness. To understand this relationship in a positive way, we can firstly say that if we develop more mindfulness we become more **contented**. Secondly, if we are more contented we are more likely to achieve greater concentration in meditation. This means that our meditation is directly supported (or undermined) by the degree of mindfulness we have in our everyday lives.

Put simply, to exercise this sort of everyday mindfulness, we need to do one thing at a time, but we need to be fully engaged in whatever that is. We can apply this principle to literally any of our activities, from cleaning our teeth in the morning to making a presentation, and thousands of other small or large activities. As the Buddha taught King Ajatasattu:

“And how, O king, is a monk endowed with mindfulness and self-possession? In this case a monk is self-possessed in advancing or withdrawing, in looking forward or looking round, in bending or stretching his limbs, in wearing his inner and outer robes and bowl, in eating, drinking, masticating, and tasting, in

answering the calls of nature, in walking, standing, sitting, sleeping, waking, speaking, and keeping silence. Thus, O king, is a monk endowed with mindfulness and self possession". (Digha-Nikaya i.47.)

Sangharakshita says that, as we develop more and more mindfulness in this way, the mundane functions of our lives are "transformed from hindrances into helps for concentration". We can't avoid the endless trivia of our lives, however much we might like to – but we can make them work in pursuit of a loftier purpose if we learn to carry them out mindfully.

We can usefully consider that our awareness can be applied to four different areas. Working in this way will strengthen our meditation practice, and therefore also our level of contentment. At a deeper level, however, it can help our awareness move closer to Reality itself. The four areas are:

1. Awareness of **things** – we can try to spend time looking at small aspects of the incredibly complex world that we live in, but normally largely ignore. This practice can challenge some of the assumptions that we conveniently make about how we relate to the world.
2. Awareness of **ourselves** – traditionally, this type of mindfulness can be applied to the four areas of body, feelings, emotions and thoughts.
3. Awareness of **people** – this is reflected in the Metta Bhavana practice, as well as the related qualities of compassion, unselfish joy and equanimity. It has the potential radically to change our relationships.
4. Awareness of **reality** – as our understanding grows we can pursue more advanced 'wisdom' practices. The basis of these is to experience more closely (not just to understand intellectually) the implications of universal conditionality. As we already know, these can be summarised as the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality of all things.

It's obvious that mindfulness isn't part of a contrasting pair, as are the other four faculties. This is simply because it is the very thing that allows us to keep these opposing pairs in balance. If we go back to the image of the double vajra, we can regard mindfulness as the central 'pivot' around which two-dimensional balance is maintained. This means that we can't overdo it, as we have seen to be a danger with the other faculties – it's impossible to have too much awareness and balance! In fact, Sangharakshita says that "If we're not trying to be balanced then we're not really practising Buddhism. Being Buddhist really means always trying to avoid slipping into extremes, or rather rising above the tendency to slide to one extreme or the other". (*What is the Dharma?*, p156)

In conclusion, and at a purely practical level, we can quickly discover how the cultivation of mindfulness adds directly to our quality of life. We may feel a lot less rushed ("the tempo of existence slackens", to quote Sangharakshita), but at the same time we may actually achieve much more in the same time, for the same output of energy. At a deeper level, however, it should be clear that the cultivation of mindfulness is a vitally important component of the 'threefold path' of ethics, meditation and wisdom. In fact, in combination with the other four faculties of faith and wisdom, energy and concentration, it has the potential to lead us all the way to Enlightenment itself.