

Five faculties
Dharma talk Dec 3, 2016

Meditation: the increasingly subtle capacity to do nothing meets discriminating wisdom

Meditation requires a nimbleness of mind coupled with the cultivated skill of paying attention

We frequently discuss the five hindrances in hopes you will recognize the phenomena as they occur. This gives you a chance to watch the hindrances in their wily attempts to have you become lost in the maze of your own predictable mental patterns.

Here is the usual list of the five hindrances: flurry and worry, ill will and hate, clinging to sense desire, sloth or torpor, and doubt

The hindrances lead to increased suffering.

We know that from our own experience.

Today I would like to consider what helps lead us out of suffering.

This is a talk about the five friends, or five faculties. The five friends are: faith, wisdom, awareness, effort, and concentration. These factors are all inter-related and each is necessary. They need to operate in balance with each other. These faculties are cultivated wholesome mental factors. We can begin to recognize, foster and integrate these factors into our practice.

All of these friends are present in varying degrees in all of our daily activities. They are native to us. We need all of these to develop any skill. Sitting here in meditation, we are deliberately cultivating the factors themselves.

When we cultivate these factors, they develop a life of their own. Having been deliberately nurtured, they become a new mental reflex, and like the whole of the dharma, they each unfold in usefulness at their own pace.

The Buddha compared these factors to a team of horses. The classic metaphor describes one lead horse with two pairs pulling a wagon. The lead horse can go as fast or slow as it likes, and the others have to fall into step. The pairs have to operate in balance with each other. One can't go faster or slower than the other. Otherwise, the wagon and the horses get completely upset.

The leading faculty, the lead horse, is mindfulness. Mindfulness is the moment-to-moment mental factor that can, at first, be compared to an observer. And with the naturally developing practice, mindfulness is experienced as an active and awake mind, or a constant presence of mind. The duality of observer and object falls away on its own, for brief moments, or maybe longer. The first pair that has to be balanced is faith and wisdom. There is an analogy that the Buddha gave for these two qualities: he compared faith to a blind giant who meets up with a small,

very sharp-eyed cripple, called wisdom. The blind giant, named faith, says to the small, sharp-eyed cripple named wisdom: 'I'm strong and can go very fast, but I can't see where I'm going. You're small and weak, but have sharp eyes. If you will ride on my shoulders, together we can go very far. The heart and the mind are brought into harmony. When heart and mind are brought to a point of co-existence, of no separation, the power that develops is far greater than one heart plus one mind. Faith has been coupled with wisdom.

The other pair of faculties, the other pair of horses pulling this wagon, is energy and concentration. Energy is a kind of determination. It needs to be carefully calibrated to be useful. Too much and we get restless, and too little and we fall asleep. Concentration focuses the energy of mindfulness onto the object of attention, moment to moment, in a sustained way.

Let's take a little more time with each of these faculties. There are many metaphors and ways of understanding each of these words. Take what is useful from these ideas, and please, leave the rest behind, without a thought. That idea you don't need just may belong to someone else.

1. Faith

The first is faith, or devotion, or conviction. Faith is the antithesis of doubt, which is the largest stumbling block to doing this work. Faith calls for a moment of confidence and trust. We must have some degree of faith that this path will bear fruit in our lives, that there is a good reason to sit here and face the wall all day.

Faith calls for the acceptance of a basic principle. It requires an acknowledgment that the reactive mind creates suffering. This understanding becomes more readily apparent to us on extended retreat, because nothing much is happening, but our own reactivity. There is not much going on which requires any kind of interpretation. We have quieted the external environment as much as possible. So it is now easier to realize that we largely live in an universe filled with our own projections. On retreat we can more easily learn that we are the authors of our own discontent.

And faith is also required to let go of our habitual way of reacting.

Faith involves a resolute and courageous act of will—the will to surrender and the courage to enter into the unknown.

Faith cannot exist because we want it, but it is a virtue that can be cultivated

It may be useful to understand there is a kinship between faith and greed. Greed searches for objects of sense-desire. Faith searches for a quality of dedicated acceptance, a willingness to cultivate the wholesome. As greed does not let go of that which is harmful, so faith does not let go that which is beneficial. They have in common the need and desire for fulfillment.

Faith is much easier for people whose primary defilement is greed, rather than hate.

Greed can open up into faith, resulting in pleasant feelings. Then we can use greed to aspire to successful meditation, and liberation. All are cravings, but

they're going in the right direction. We are using greed to get rid of greed. That can be our best approach, because greed is only truly eliminated late in our movement toward liberation. Greed is one of the last things to slip away. If we use our craving in useful manner, we are at least searching for that which will give us, and the world, the greatest benefit.

Faith is a quality, and direction of the heart. It is connected to the capacity to love. Faith is also connected to devotion. It entails being open to that space where giving and receiving are exactly the same. The sense of separation can be surrendered. There is a lessening of pride. There can be an open-hearted generosity of spirit. We learn that vulnerability is an entry point, or gateway, to union.

And yet we need to remember that blind faith is useless.

Faith needs discriminating wisdom. The heart needs the mind. That blind giant needs that sharp-eyed cripple. They depend on each other.

The Buddha's path is called the middle path, which means a path of balance.

So, let us consider wisdom.

2. Wisdom

Wisdom understands reality from different perspectives at the experiential level. It understands the basic characteristic of phenomena arising and passing. It understands impermanence. It witnesses the dividing, dissecting, disintegration, and dissolution of the seemingly solid construct of the body. Wisdom understands the mind and all its mental constructs as, at most, a temporary truth. Sometimes we lie to ourselves. Those lies are not solid. Anger, fear, and all the passions are reduced to sensation, arising and passing away.

Wisdom is the strength of mind that permits contact with reality without delusion, without self-deception.

And it takes faith to allow the delusions to fall into fragments and get blown away as ephemeral.

Wisdom knows there is no fixed and permanent self, but an ongoing process of "selfing" and reselfing."

This requires the great courage of faith.

So faith and wisdom is the first pair, which must accompany mindfulness, or wakefulness, the capacity for attending to the mind moments as they unfold.

Effort and concentration is the second pair.

3. Effort

Right effort involves vigor, diligence and energy. We have to make effort and have courage to observe what should be observed, and to refrain from that, which should be abandoned as unhelpful mental habits. This effort, this energy directs the mind toward the object, impels it, and holds it until the object has been

well seen. It calls up the necessary courage we need to experience the benefits of insight.

Right effort is neither strained nor complacent. Sometimes it is heroic, and sometimes it is easy or delightful.

We need to fine-tune our efforts, so that it is neither too intense nor too slack, the way we might tune a stringed instrument. We can take care that we are neither sharp nor flat.

Right effort is steadfast, heedful, and persistent.

The relationship between energy and concentration is as important as each are individually.

If energy is not coupled with concentration, energy becomes restlessness.

If concentration is too strong and there is no energy, then we are mired in sloth and torpor.

In contrast with single pointed concentration on the breath, insight meditation, which attends to the flow of phenomena, with its attention on impermanence, may bring up all the energy it needs from the constant arising and ceasing of thoughts and feelings. If our minds are busy, we think of harnessing that energy that is already in mind. We have the energy we need already present. We don't need to fight the mind activities, or call a silent mind better than a noisy mind, but, instead, harvest the energy of the active mind.

4. Accurate Concentration

Accurate concentration, accurate focus, is the next faculty, or mental factor. Breath at the nostrils is an explicit object to refine the capacity for accurate concentration. Concentration does not arise by itself. Both mindfulness and effort are required. With accurate concentration, the mind falls directly onto the object, moment after moment. It is sustained awareness.

Mind becomes increasingly composed, focused, and unified. With intention, there is a narrowing of the field of attention. The mind that is made one-pointed, does not waver, does not scatter itself. It becomes steady. It has been likened to a flame in the absence of wind. Each mind-moment lasts, for one moment only, and is at once followed by another. The function of concentration is to provide some stability in this perpetual flux, by enabling the mind to stand in, or on, the same object, without distraction, for more than one moment.

In addition, accurate concentration can have a synthetic quality. Accurate concentration can bind together a number of mental states that arise at the same time. This can be illustrated with a metaphor—we can think of concentration as having a similar effect as the water that binds the lather of soap bubbles. The bubbles hold together as one, because of the binding tension of the water.

As we focus on the water of this metaphor, we are using awareness to be aware of itself, rather than being tied to a specific object.

5. Awareness, or Mindfulness

The next factor, or friend, is awareness, or mindfulness. This is the witnessing of all events pertaining to mind and matter within the framework of the body. Mind includes all the senses, the steady stream of emotional responses, and cognitive phenomena.

Awareness can never be too strong or powerful. Awareness works, with concentration, toward being constant, sustained, uninterrupted, and continuous. Insight unfolds naturally from this growing awareness.

Sometimes there is a strong counter-force to being present in awareness. Our defenses can try to protect us from our own consciousness. The hindrances to awareness are active. Flurry and worry, ill will or hate, fixation on the desires of the senses, sleepiness or sluggishness, and doubt, all become signals of active avoidance.

Mindfulness of body is a very useful focus of attention in a sitting practice. Awareness of the body is connected with the need for a sense of being, a sense of groundedness. The primary sensation of the body is free from conceptualizations. It is just simple and straightforward. There is a direct relationship with the earth, to weight, to physical existence, to being alive.

We don't need to try to specifically to watch and keep track of what is going on. We don't need to try to formalize the sitting situation and make it into some special activity that we are performing. We are simply sitting here.

The sense of being embodied, of being grounded, develops on its own. This sense of embodiment does not need to be cultivated, but it is a direct result of the actual fact of being here. We sit. And we sit. And we breathe. And we sit and we breathe. Sometimes we think, but still we are thinking sitting thoughts. Our thoughts can develop a flat bottom. Mindfulness of body is connected with the earth. It is an openness that has a base, a foundation. A quality of expansive awareness can develop through mindfulness of body, becoming a sense of being settled and therefore being able to afford to open out.

One of our teachers wrote: "Mindfulness of body has to do with trying to remain human, rather than becoming an animal or fly, or etheric being. It means just trying to remain a human being, an ordinary human being."

Without this particular foundation of mindfulness, the rest of our meditation practice could be very airy-fairy-vacillating back and forth, trying this and trying that. We could be constantly tiptoeing on the surface of the universe, not actually getting a foothold anywhere. You could become an eternal hitchhiker. So with this technique, we develop some basic solidness. In mindfulness of body, there is a sense of finding some home ground.

We can also work with the awareness of the dynamism of being alive within the body

A common misunderstanding is that the meditative state of mind has to be captured and then nursed and cherished. That is definitely the wrong approach. If you try to domesticate your mind through meditation, if you try to possess it by holding onto a meditative state, then the clear result is a loss of freshness and

spontaneity. If you try to hold on without lapse all the time, then maintaining your awareness will begin to be a hassle. It will become rigid and painful.

You do not have to secure your mind, but, instead, you can tune into its spontaneous process.

There is also a connection with the level of raw anxiety about our own survival that manifests in us constantly, second by second, minute by minute. There is a constant fearful alertness, ready for any pending attack. It is like having a pilot light always on, at the ready. Without acceptance of this background sensation, we will be trying to avoid it, or fix it, in ways that multiply our suffering.

Instead of regarding this survival mentality as something negative, we can make use of it. That raw anxiety can be felt as a sense of being, a basic acknowledgment of existing. I am alive. I am here. This is what it feels like to be alive.

This innate alertness can be utilized, as part of our stream of consciousness. It becomes the part of the practice of mindfulness. It brings clarity, skill, and intelligence. You are here; you are living. Your heart pulsates and you breathe. All kinds of things are happening in you at once. Let the very sense of being alive be the object of your awareness: every beat of your heart, every breath, is mindfulness itself. You do not have to breathe specially; your breath is an expression of mindfulness. Meditation becomes very personal, and very direct.”

Concluding: all the faculties are interconnected.

So, here we have the five faculties: faith and wisdom, effort and concentration, and mindful awareness.

None of the faculties stand alone. They are part of each other, helping support a nimbleness of mind.

Each of the five faculties exercise control in their own specific components of the meditative mind. Each are called upon to subdue a particular mental disability and to marshal the corresponding potency of the mind.

The five faculties are active powers that coordinate and channel our natural energies, directing mind toward harmony and balance. As long as we live and act under the dominion of the forces of clinging, aversion and delusion, we are not our own masters but passive pawns, driven by our blind desires. Freedom requires inner autonomy. We need our five spiritual friends.

The faculties already exist. They are capacities of our nature. Assigning them a task, and cultivating them, reveals their immense potential.

The faculty of faith provides the element of inspiration and aspiration that steers the mind away from the quagmire of doubt. Trust develops over time, out of real experience, and eventually brings calm. It brings about the possibility of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

The faculty of energy kindles the fire of sustained endeavor. This burns up obstructions built up over our life time, and brings us to maturity in practice.

The faculty of mindfulness contributes clear awareness, which is the antidote to carelessness.

The faculty of concentration holds the beam of attention steadily focused on the rise and fall of bodily and mental events, calm and composed.

The faculty of wisdom drives away the darkness of ignorance. It brings the insight of impermanence.

Meditation is a collective task of all the faculties. To achieve this balanced practice, the faculties are divided into two pairs. Each member must counter the undesirable tendency inherent in the other, thus enabling it to develop its fullest potential.

Since all of us have these faculties within us, there is every reason to cultivate them, to work toward well-being.

This is a self-correcting, balancing process. We are moving toward a nimbleness of mind.

It is my hope that this discussion of these wholesome mental factors, these five friends, is useful for your practice.

May all beings be well.

Source authors: Ayya Khema, Gil Fronsdal, Chogyama Trungpa Rinpoche (section on the foundations of mindfulness largely lifted here), Edward Conze, Bhikku Bodhi, and BuddhaNet

