

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 two complementary pairs – (1) faith as the complement to wisdom and (2) concentration as the complement to energy. We have now finally reached the fifth faculty, **mindfulness**, which we can also describe as ‘awareness’. As we originally observed, this is the faculty through which we are able to keep the other two pairs of faculties in balance. The important point here is that we use mindfulness 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 see that we are behaving like a ‘headless chicken’ (i.e. we are 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 in the here and now, we become victims of our 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**. This ‘mindfulness of purpose’ entails “...developing the habit of recollecting one’s goal often enough and deeply enough to ensure that one’s life is organised around it” (Sangharakshita).

This tells us, effectively, that the practice of mindfulness certainly doesn’t have to be just a matter of our ‘formal’ meditation – it’s something we can bring directly to all of the routine activities of our 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 driving a vehicle, to making a business presentation, and thousands of other small or large activities. As the Buddha taught King Ajātasattu:

“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”. (Dīgha-Nikāya 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 more refined purpose if we learn to carry them out mindfully. What’s more, things that we have regarded simply as drudgery can take on a new dimension of satisfaction, if not quiet enjoyment.

We can usefully consider our awareness as acting in four different areas. Working in this way will strengthen our meditation practice, and therefore also our level of contentment. Ultimately, 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 our relationship with the world.
2. Awareness of **ourselves** –this type of mindfulness can be sub-divided into being aware of the four areas of body, feelings, emotions and thoughts.
3. Awareness of **people** – this is reflected in the *mettā bhāvanā* practice, as well as the three 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 dependent arising. 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). This is surely an application of the all-important doctrine of the Middle Way.

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 Awakening itself.