

Dharmette: Introduction to the Wisdom Faculty

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 12, 2020

Good morning. I appreciate the chance to meditate here with you on this Sunday morning. Some of you have been doing these Monday through Friday morning sittings. I appreciate that you came back for this special Sunday morning sitting that is partly being done to support an online retreat that started yesterday. I appreciate that there are so many people who are interested in meditation practice and mindfulness. Even in this time when we're separated and aren't able to come together physically, we are together in heart. We are together in purpose and spirit through a practice. So thank you.

What I'd like to talk about today is a background or overview of the topic of the Five Faculties. Tomorrow and for the next week, I'm going to talk about wisdom, the fifth of the Five Faculties. The first four are usually translated as faith, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Wisdom is a lofty topic in many ways. But the way that wisdom operates in Buddhism is that wisdom arises out of the practice. It arises out of the body. And it arises out of the support of the other faculties.

As our faith or confidence bring us into the present moment – as our capacity for engagement brings us into the present moment here in this body – as mindfulness begins to awaken our capacity for attention, not just as a cognitive ability but as an awareness that is also grounded in the body – and as our capacity for the focus that concentration develops – we awaken much more than focus, because *samādhi* or concentration is also very much an embodied experience of wholeness or unification.

The Five Faculties are called faculties, because they are capacities that we all have. We all have the capacity for faith or confidence, for effort, for attention or awareness, for focus, and for wisdom. As we begin strengthening the first four, it's almost as if it's natural for wisdom to surface.

You don't have to read books on Buddhism for Buddhist wisdom. If you want to become wise in Buddhism, you want to read the book that's in your own heart and body. This is where wisdom is born. It's to have the ability to come back in a clear, open, and dedicated way, maybe even in a deep, embodied way into our experience of the moment, so that our natural faculty or capacity for wisdom can operate.

This idea is that these are capacities that we all inherently have. Even wisdom is a capacity that we can clarify, make strong. That we can let it really work in a natural way speaks to the idea that we don't have to be the one who is engineering our life or our practice. We are not the ones who have to figure it out, make something happen, or avoid something. We create the conditions that allow this natural capacity to arise. One of those conditions is a deep trust that there is a wisdom that arises out of the whole psychophysical system of the body.

A lot of the reason that we practice mindfulness is not only to be mindfully present and see what's going on, but in a certain way to also get out of our own way, and allow this capacity to support us – rather than being up in the control tower figuring it out, planning, and analyzing. “Am I there yet? Is this the right form of experience? Am I doing it right? Am I doing it wrong?” It's to learn to soften and relax the control tower of self – me, myself and I: “It's all up to me. I'm the victim, I'm having a hard time. I have to do it. Look how great I am.” The idea is to soften and relax this part of the whole psychophysical system.

Classically in Buddhism this process begins with the first faculty, which is often translated into English as ‘faith.’ I sometimes like the word ‘trust.’ A nice middle way is ‘confidence.’ We have some confidence in our ability to be present. We have confidence in the value of waking up to our experience here. We have confidence in a path of practice – and that as we practice mindfulness and concentration, it keeps opening up the dharma book that's in ourselves. It becomes a very safe and supportive place to be here in the present moment, to find ourselves grounded here. It's a process to get there. It's not easy, and that's why faith is somehow important.

Some people react to the English word ‘faith.’ It can imply some idea that you have to have faith in some doctrine that you have to believe in, or can't believe in, or that is something you don't know. I love the fact that the word ‘believe’ in its original usage a long time ago meant to love something, and to hold it dear. It didn't mean to believe a cognitive thing like a tenet or belief. It meant where you put your heart in, and what you love.

This idea of faith is a capacity for love, care, or kindness. Here is what I love: “I love myself. I love to wake up. I love to be able to bring compassion and care to whatever is happening here. I love the support of the refuges – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – and the fact that I’m not doing this alone. We’re supported by so much. So allow faith to somehow be here to support you. You will know it’s supporting you if you begin to rest or settle into this body.

The capacity for effort in the Five Faculties is a little different from what it is for many people. When some people hear that they have to make effort, they get tight. It’s work, and it’s going to be exhausting. One of the paradoxes is we can make a lot of effort to relax. So if the focus is to relax, then we can’t strain, push, get tight, or work a lot to relax. But we’re diligent and persistent in staying here, relaxing into the body. Relaxing into the body doesn’t mean becoming too limp. It means softening and relaxing the attention, so that we rest in our body as our body keeps us upright. The effort is relaxing and softening – as long as we don’t fall asleep. If we’re tired or dull, then it’s good to recognize that and wake up the alertness of attention. There is a balance of alertness and relaxation.

Without the effort to bring ourselves back to the cushion – the effort to begin again when the mind wanders off – there is no practice. The art of that effort is how to make it something that you enjoy, something that’s nice and supportive, so that every time your mind wanders off, you look forward to the effort to come back in a kind, supportive, and easeful way. Come back in a way that you can’t believe your good luck that you get to come back, as opposed to thinking, “Oh no, I wandered off in thought. Terrible me, I’m not doing it right.” Then it doesn’t even feel good to come back. I’ve done that where I’ve jerked or pounced my mind back, and it doesn’t really feel good.

Then the faculty of mindfulness: to be present for the experience, and to trust our capacity to be aware. It’s an awareness that is very simple. If it’s not simple, it’s not awareness.

And then *samādhi*, the concentration faculty. Something simple I’d like to say today is that *samādhi* can be understood as a unification process, bringing or gathering together all of our capacities to be settled here on our body, our breathing, and whatever the attention is going to.

One way to come to that kind of unification is the mantra “This too.” It also works very well for mindfulness, and that is “This too” we include in our awareness. It’s not included so that we think about it, but “This too” is included in the silent or quiet attention of mindfulness. “This too” is included in this gathering together.

To have all these capacities beginning to settle over the days, weeks, and even the years of practice allows a very deep capacity for wisdom, discernment, understanding, and insight to begin. It’s not something that we’re responsible for, but it’s something that reveals itself to us because all the conditions are in place for the mind’s capacity for wisdom to operate.

The wisdom faculty will be the topic for these next few days. I look forward to sharing what I’ve learned, and to practicing together with you. Thank you very much for now. I very much look forward to our next time together.