Five Spiritual Faculties: Mind

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 48:59

There are many ways to understand the path of awakening. There are many metaphors used to bring us to a realization of what it is that we're doing in spiritual practice. And so too in the Buddha's teachings there are many ways of understanding just what it is that we're doing here.

But in all of these metaphors, in all these ways of understanding, there is the reality behind it. What is actually happening over the course of one's walking a spiritual path is the gradual realization of our condition at this moment in time and an understanding that the mind can develop, the mind can be enhanced, the mind can be enlightened—to bring lightness into the mind.

The Abhidhamma, or Buddhist psychology, has an understanding that the unawakened mind has within it, or is composed of, a number of factors of mind—mental factors that go into and make up each moment of our experience. Many of them in the unawakened mind tend towards dullness and sleepiness and restlessness, confusion, inability to be present, doubt, disappointment, frustration, despair, hopelessness, low self-esteem—a very unbright, unawakened mind.

The way Buddhist psychology understands the path of practice is that we gradually replace those factors of mind with their opposites, or with factors of mind that oppose them, so that sleepiness or dullness of mind is opposed by energy and clarity of mind. Doubt or confusion is opposed or overcome by faith or confidence. The path of practice is seen as one of developing these positive and enhancing qualities of mind.

There are many different mental factors, many different attributes or qualities to the mind. We know them; we meet them every day. Sitting here today, we come into closer contact with them.

As I've mentioned, there are the famous five hindrances, or obstructions to a clear mind. Sleepiness or dullness. Doubt and wavering in our ability to proceed with confidence. Restlessness, an agitated state of mind that cannot come into and stay with the present experience, obstructing the mind from clearly being and seeing what's happening now. Strong aversion, dislike, or wanting to get away from experience, particularly unpleasant experience, whether mental or physical. If we react to it strongly with aversion, we no longer see that experience clearly. Our mind is obstructed, unbright, unclear.

And the same with desire. When a pleasurable experience is noticed—maybe it was the tofu pops at dinner time, maybe you really like tofu pops—as soon as you get attached and really want that, you stop seeing clearly the nature of what it is that's happening. Desire can blind us to the nature of reality.

So we gradually and persistently, with great energy, come to notice the qualities of our mind that are

darkening and hindering and obstructing clarity of vision, and we gradually replace them, moment after moment. It's a very meticulous process and requires considerable persistence to, in each moment, see what's present and replace the dark qualities with light qualities.

In all of this vast exchange of energies and mental states and factors of mind, there are five which are, or gradually become, the controlling factors of mind—the factors that control the others and guide us along our spiritual journey. They're called the five spiritual faculties of mind.

Tonight I want to speak briefly about them and to talk about them in such a way that you begin to recognize them in your own practice—when they're present and when they're not present. So that if you notice you do not have these qualities in your mind, you can arouse them to enhance your clarity and understanding.

These five factors of mind have a relationship with each other where one is the cause for the arising of the second, the second is the cause for the arising of the third, the third is the cause for the arising of the fourth, and so on. They develop in our practice in a cyclical and gradual way, each feeding the other.

The first of these factors of mind is confidence. Confidence is the basis for and the arousing of energy or effort, the second spiritual faculty. Energy or effort is the causal condition for the arising of mindfulness. Mindfulness, the ability to observe and to see clearly, is the cause for the arising of concentration, or single-pointedness of mind. And when the mind is single-pointed and focused, we see into our experience more deeply, thereby gaining more knowledge or wisdom, the fifth of the spiritual faculties. Confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

So I'll speak about each one a little bit.

Confidence is the faith element in our practice. We who've been raised in a Christian or Judeo-Christian culture have a particular understanding of faith that sometimes does not accurately reflect the confidence needed in this type of practice. We're not talking about the blind faith of "believe in me and I'll give you what you need." It's not that type of faith that we need. What we need is confidence in ourselves, confidence in our teacher, confidence in the actual practice that we're doing.

That confidence needs to be based on our experience—not based on willy-nilly pie in the sky, but on what we have directly experienced in our own life.

We can't have great confidence at the beginning of our practice in something we haven't yet experienced. We start with just a little inkling: well, maybe this is so. Maybe I have some sense that this might be a useful practice, or this teacher might be someone who seems to know what he or she is talking about. And I feel myself that I have some confidence I can do the practice. We don't know yet, because we haven't practiced to such a degree that we feel fulfilled. But with a little bit of confidence, we can begin to practice.

When we have that little bit of confidence, it begins to settle the mind down. We live in America, where

spiritual practices are as numerous as different kinds of cars. You can go shopping for a different spiritual practice each week if you like. And it's hard to know—the mind gets quite agitated when it's in shopping mode, not having really any idea which practice is going to do it for us. Maybe a little bit of Dzogchen, maybe a little bit of Vipassana, maybe even a little shamanistic studies, a little workshop here and a weekend there. The mind gets very agitated, very confused.

But when we have investigated and looked closely into what each practice technique is talking about, and we come to some understanding of it, if we can have confidence in one of them, the mind begins to settle down. Confidence or faith has that characteristic of settling the mind from some of its agitations. When we have this little bit of confidence, the mind begins to get clear just from the settledness. Clarity of mind is a direct result—initial clarity of mind is a direct result of some confidence.

Another function of confidence is that when we have confidence in our practice, in a technique, or in a teacher, it can serve as the foundation for continued interest in that practice, in that teacher, in our own development. Without that confidence, we cannot sustain our interest. We're here today, gone tomorrow, without confidence that this practice, this teacher, this path—or I myself—can make that effort.

And so this confidence is really an essential initial ingredient to walking the spiritual path. It's not something that once you've got, you've got forever. The initial confidence and understanding—or understanding that leads to confidence—overcomes some degree of doubt, some degree of confusion or hesitation in the mind. But there come times of difficulty in practice when that doubt will come up again. We'll doubt that we have the ability to sit here with such a confused mind. Or we'll doubt that the teacher really knows what they're talking about, having given an answer like that to a question. Or we'll doubt that this technique or this practice can actually get a handle on the amount of confusion and darkness in our own mind. And when that doubt comes, our confidence is gone.

So it's important to understand that in the course of our spiritual practice, there are going to be times of great confidence and determination and faith in ourselves, our teacher, and our practice. And there are going to be other times when it's very doubtful that the teacher knows anything and that I can do it. When we understand that, then we don't get so strung out and so moved and affected emotionally by the presence or absence of confidence.

Some years ago I was in Burma, and after I'd been there for about three years, one Burmese monk—an elder monk who had been to America for three months teaching—came to the monastery where I was staying in Rangoon. He heard that I was there, that there was an American monk staying in the monastery, so he sent someone and asked if I would come see him. I went to see him. He didn't speak very much English, I didn't speak very much Burmese, and we had a very poor translator, but we could communicate a little bit.

He said, "Well, how long have you been here?" I said, "Oh, I've been here about three years." He was quite surprised, because at that time in Burma, the longest visa you could get was for about three months. But I

kept getting extensions, and through some good luck I was able to stay a little longer.

He said, "Oh, three years. To stay here three years, you must have a lot of confidence or a lot of faith."

I said, "Well, sometimes I feel like I have a lot of confidence and faith and I want to practice. And other times I feel like I don't have any."

And he said, "Ah, this is even better." He said, "Because when your faith or your confidence is down, not present, and you don't have any confidence in yourself, and you don't have any confidence in your teacher, and you don't have any confidence in your practice—and yet you stay in there and keep practicing—then this really strengthens your confidence."

And so it's good to go through those swings of confidence and no confidence.

It really strengthens your mind, and it develops your spiritual capabilities and your spiritual path.

But faith alone—confidence—is not enough. It's not sufficient just to be confident, just to have faith in your teacher or yourself or the teaching. You actually need to do something with that confidence. And with that confidence one can begin to make effort, to endeavor to do the practice.

Whatever practice it is—and in this case we're talking about insight—but whatever you intend to do in life, whether it's a spiritual practice or not, once you have confidence that you want to do something or that you can, then you have to make effort. Even if it's buying a house or a car, it doesn't happen just by wanting or having confidence that you can do it. You actually have to do something. The same is true with spiritual practice. We need to arouse some determination and energy in the mind.

And how do we do that? One thing that seems to be necessary, seems to be essential for most of us, is some sense of urgency. Spiritual practice is difficult—let's acknowledge that right at the beginning. We wouldn't do it unless we felt we needed to. And it's that sense of "I need to do this, I need to learn how to practice, I need to learn how to meditate, I need to get a handle on my anxiety, my frustration, my fear, my anger, my whatever it is"—that sense of urgency, that sense of "now is the time to do what's got to be done," is what arouses and propels us. It generates the energy based on our confidence.

You might ask yourself, why is it that some people never get to spiritual practice? No urgency in their life. No necessity for it. And so it doesn't happen. But for all of us here, there has been some sense—it may be weak, it may be strong, it may be very obvious, it may not be so obvious—there is some urgency to be here. Something has brought us here this weekend. And when you look within yourself, you may discover what it is. Why is it so urgent to sit here in utter agony for so many hours today? It's not because it's fun. You need it. Some part of you needs to wake up. And some part of you recognizes that. And you're here.

Energy, effort, making the endeavor—this is a really tricky subject to talk about in meditation practice, because we in America are great strivers. We decide what we want and then we go get it. Whether it's a degree, a car, material goods, knowledge of some sort, or whatever it is, we are great strivers. We have

really learned how to harness our willpower to get results.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work in spiritual practice.

The effort, the energy that's actually needed is not one of striving for some result, but rather the effort or energy to be present. To just be here right now. Not to be here tomorrow or later or next week or a year from now, but right now. Only right now. It doesn't take much energy to be here right now. And that's all the energy you need. That's all the effort you need—to be here.

But we misunderstand the whole path of practice and think that somewhere stretched out between here and some point in the future is our spiritual path, and that we've got to arouse tremendous energy and effort to walk that path from here to there. It's not necessary. The spiritual practice and the spiritual path is only here, now. We only need the energy to be here, moment after moment.

So the real key to the energy or effort necessary for spiritual practice is not how much or what quantity, but rather what balance of mind is necessary to just be here. If you're feeling sleepy, it takes a little bit of energy to overcome sleepiness. If you're feeling restless, that's a little too much energy and you need to back off. So it's the balance of energy that we're really playing with, the balance of our effort.

It's the direction, it's where we apply our effort and our energy that really matters in spiritual practice.

When I was in Burma, again, at this particular monastery, they start you out on a very rigorous schedule of about twenty hours of practice a day and four hours of sleep. That's just the nature of practice there. The first few weeks they ask you, "How many hours did you sleep last night?" And if it's more than four, you're dismissed pretty quickly.

I somehow got it into my head that good spiritual practice was being able to sit on my cushion for long periods of time, through utter agony—two hours, three hours, four hours, five hours, whatever. So I started developing my ability to sit with great pain, thinking that *that* was the energy, that was the effort, that was the type of effort needed to wake up.

After a couple of weeks I was into good pain and long sittings, and I was reporting it to my teacher every day. I'd go and say, "Oh, I'm sitting and I had this great pain, and I watched this pain for so many hours." He let me report like this for some number of weeks. Then one day he said, "Do you know why you have so much pain?"

I said, "No, I don't."

He said, "You sit too long. It's not how long you can sit still. It's the balance of mind in sitting." He told me I needed to learn how to balance that degree of concentration and energy. "You need to walk more. You want to sit a long time? You've got to walk a long time. Balance, balance, balance."

So that's the type of effort, that's the type of energy you need in practice—a balanced effort. One of the

teachers I teach with uses the story of a tightrope walker. How much energy does a tightrope walker need walking across the tightrope? Well, quite a lot, but in a very balanced way. It's not so much about the quantity of energy, but the delicacy of the balance.

With confidence in ourselves, in our teacher, in our practice technique, we become willing, with a sense of urgency, to make some effort, some attempt at waking up, at being present with this moment's experience. And what happens when we do that? As we develop the energy, as we get a sense of urgency and develop some mental power to be present, we begin to notice: what's happening?

In the sitting, we focus our attention on the breath. In the walking, we turn our attention to the movement of the legs, and we begin to see what's actually happening. We begin to focus, to connect, to try to connect our attention to the breath—the in-breath, the rising and falling of the abdomen, the in-breath and out-breath at the nostrils. The mind begins to notice; we begin to observe what's actually happening.

That ability to see, that ability of the mind to see experience, for the mind to know and observe—this is mindfulness, the third of the spiritual faculties.

In giving the instructions today, I talked about focusing or turning your attention to the primary object of the breath and connecting your attention to it. That connecting is very important, because if we don't actually connect our attention to the experience, we'll never know it. And not only do we need to connect our attention, we need to sustain our attention. Connecting and sustaining our attention to the meditation object—that movement of the belly, that sensation at the tip of the nostrils—is essential for clear seeing, for observing what's actually happening.

When we can connect and sustain our attention, steady the mind for that brief moment of a rising or an in-breath—a second or two—it's as if we come face to face with that experience. And as we develop the ability to come face to face with the breath, we also develop the ability to come face to face with emotions, memories, thoughts, plans, other physical sensations in the body—the whole vast array of what it is to be human. We develop the ability to see clearly what's happening.

How can we be free if we don't know what we're attached to? The first step is to see where we are on the path, to see what our fears are, to see where our mind goes, to see what our fantasy futures are, to see what our shameful past is, to see what is going on in this body, where we're holding, where we're tight. This is what we need to see by connecting and sustaining our attention on the experience.

It happens to all of us. As soon as we get some clarity of mind, some ability to connect with our experience and stay with it, we find great discomfort in the body. Pain. There isn't anybody here that didn't sit with really uncomfortable pain today. It's the nature of the body at times. And when we focus and look clearly, carefully, that's what we see.

Learning how to deal with pain is quite necessary, an essential thing to learn. Initially, when we come in contact with pain—you know, the knee that's just on fire, or the back that's like a board, or the neck that

feels like it has a meat hook through it—at first it's just a massive, solid pain. And the mind is so reactive to it, so afraid of it, so disliking of it, that the mind won't even get close.

The mind just skitters away before you can contact it. It's like splashing water on a hot griddle—it just skitters off without really landing. Pain is really hot, and the mind simply skitters off when it comes close.

It takes some persistence, some real perseverance, some care to gently bring the mind close to that level of discomfort. It's not something you can just jam your mind into and make go away. Simply enduring it, gritting your teeth and bearing it—that is not the way to get close to pain. Rather, you gently bring the mind to it. Around the edges. Skirt around the edges. Begin to explore around the pain. Take a quick look inside and see what's right in the center of that pain, but don't expect to stay there for long. And slowly, as you get comfortable with the periphery of pain, you can open to the outer extremities of it and gradually move the mind into the center.

And what happens to this solid block of pain that stretches from hip to ankle? We begin to notice that there's some movement in there, some shifting, some change, some fluxing. Some tightness, some tension, some pulling, some stretching, some bubbling, some heat, some stabbing, some ripping, some tearing. It's a massive change. It's not so solid. With steadiness of mind, we can begin to approach the solidity of experience and see its composite and fluxing nature.

Steadiness of mind—the ability to connect and sustain our attention. It's that sustaining of attention on the experience that allows the mind to open and accept that experience.

So what is it that we learn to observe, that we are mindful of? It is said in the texts, in the Buddha's teaching, that there are four foundations for mindfulness. Four experiences that mindfulness rests on.

The first of these is what we use as the primary object: our body, our physical, material experience. The movement of the breath, the stretching and tightness and tension of the abdomen, the tingling sensations at the nostrils, pain, heat, movement of the legs in walking. The physical body, the experience of it. This is the first foundation of mindfulness.

The second foundation of mindfulness is what's called feeling. And it's not emotion in this case, but the pleasant or unpleasant quality to each and every experience that we have. If you look carefully at your experience of your mind, of your body, you will discover that there is a tone to it in each moment. A tone of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality. It's hard to see a neutral experience because when things are okay and neutral, we tend to fall asleep. When they're very unpleasant, we know it. When they're very pleasant, we know it. And sometimes that's all we can know of our experience—that it's very unpleasant, or that it's quite pleasant. This is another foundation for mindfulness, another foundation for observing what's actually happening, the basis for observing.

So we have the body, or physical material experience, and feelings. The third foundation is consciousness itself—the nature of the mind to think. And who hasn't been thinking today? Into the past remembering,

into the future planning, into fantasies fantasizing. It's the nature of the mind to keep really busy. When we begin to pay attention, as we do today, we begin to discover that the mind is rarely home. It's on the go all the time. Those thoughts, those fantasies, those futures, those memories are all foundation for mindfulness. We can learn to observe them happening without buying in. We can train ourselves to know planning is happening, remembering is happening, fantasizing is happening, without getting caught in the story of that particular memory, that particular fantasy, that particular plan. Training the mind to observe what's happening rather than indulging in what's happening. So consciousness is the third foundation for mindfulness.

And the fourth is the contents of mind, or mental states. These we more commonly know as the hindrances, the factors of enlightenment, the emotions that we have.

When we feel frustrated, when we feel disappointed, when we feel joy, when we feel confident, when we feel loving, when we feel hatred, when we feel depressed—these are the contents of our mind. These are the contents of our consciousness. They too are a foundation for awakening, for observing, for developing the ability to know what's happening, for mindfulness.

So these are the four foundations of mindfulness: the body, pleasant or unpleasant feelings, consciousness of thoughts, plans, fantasies, and remembering, and mental states or emotions.

As we develop the ability to know our experience, to observe it and recognize it, to see it—as we develop the ability to extend the continuity of attention from one moment to the next to the next—rising, falling, rising, falling, thinking, planning, knee pain, back to the back, back to the abdomen, back to the breath, rising, falling—we develop continuity of attention. The mind gets collected.

The mind, in all of its fragmented pieces that is strung out across the universe of the past and the future, we pull it in. We pull in these little bits and pieces from this memory. We bring back our mind from this plan. We bring back our mind from this part of the body. We collect our mind in one place. We focus the mind. More of the mind gets collected and focused on this experience right now.

It's as if we take a magnifying glass, a magnifying lens, and focus our mind on just what it is we want to look at. And that's really what happens in the continuity of mindfulness—the mind does not have the opportunity to fragment and scatter to other experience. It stays together, comes together, collects. This is the one-pointedness of mind. It can only come about when we are mindful or observing with some continuity. The mind becomes concentrated.

When the mind is concentrated, when we look at something through a magnifying lens, we see more detail of what it is we're looking at. When the mind becomes concentrated, whatever it is we look at, we see more clearly. We see more details. We gain more knowledge.

So if I hold up my hand here and say, "Well, what do you see?" You see a hand. And if you come closer and look again, you can see four or five fingers. And if you get even closer, you can see all the knuckles. And if

you get really close, you can see the prints, the fingerprints and the lines. And if you get really close, you might be able to see the pores. And if you use a magnifying lens, you can see even closer than that. More knowledge about the same experience.

Concentration is like putting on glasses to see what's already there. We've lived our life for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty years. We've been breathing every day of our life. And have we really noticed it yet? Did you notice something about your breath today that you never noticed before? As we practice into the night and tomorrow, you may begin to discover experiences in the body, experiences in the mind that you never noticed before. It's not that they haven't been happening. They've been happening. But the mind has not been powerful enough to see them.

When the mind gets concentrated, we see more clearly. We see more deeply. We gain more knowledge, more wisdom, more understanding. And it's this understanding that frees the mind from bondage.

Because as we see and look carefully into our experience, we begin to discover that there are characteristics to all of our experience. Everything is changing. Do you know what that means? That means that everything is changing. It means that nothing is going to stay still. Your body is not going to stay the way it is now. Your mind is not going to stay the way it is now. Thank goodness.

And yet, we don't live with that knowledge. We live with the endeavor and striving to keep our body youthful and strong and healthy, like it's nineteen years old still. It's not going to stay that way. Let go of that one. Free your mind from that bondage.

Very simple example. Think of what's going on in the mind. How attached are we to ideas of who we are? Ideas about what we want that will make us happy? Ideas about our spouse, or intended spouse, or who we would like to have as a spouse that will make us happy? Our mind changes. We can know this intellectually, can't we? Everything changes. Why get attached? Why get stuck on something that's going to change anyway? We know this intellectually, but we can't let go.

We can't live with that knowledge until we experience it directly. This practice takes you to that experience—direct experience of the change of all phenomena. When you see that, it's not a struggle to let go. You see that you can't hold on anyway. Seeing into the nature of impermanence is a major step in spiritual practice, one which insight practice can take you to.

These spiritual faculties, these controlling faculties of the mind that I've been speaking about—confidence giving rise to and being the basis for our making effort, arousing energy to be aware, to observe, to look carefully at our life, to see what's actually going on here in this body, in this mind. And when we do, with some continuity, look carefully, the mind collects and focuses and sees more deeply into our experience. It sees more deeply into what it really is to be a human being, sees more deeply into the nature of our bondage to this body, to our mind, to our ideas. And it sees more deeply into the nature of freedom, of liberation, of enlightening the mind.

This practice is not insignificant. In an appreciation of the profundity of the Buddha's teaching—of guiding the mind into itself to free itself from bondage—just getting an appreciation for the profundity of that is worth your effort.

Well, I have talked enough. Let's just sit for a couple of minutes. Or if you're lying down, you can just lie like that, just for a couple of minutes, and let this whole talk settle.

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