Five Spiritual Faculties

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:40

I had a friend visiting here today who hadn't been here for a while. She used to be on staff and has sat a lot. She was saying how seeing all of you here walking really slowly, really quiet and pulled in, at first felt really bizarre because she'd been out of the scene for a while. But after being here and beginning to feel the energy, you don't know how powerful it is what you're all doing here. It kind of exudes by osmosis. The rest of us get to pick it up once in a while. And it brought back to her some of the feelings of the joy and delight that can come with practice, that she's experienced in the past in practice. I know probably a lot of you were not feeling joy and delight today, but you taste it at times. Just realize that it's having a powerful effect on everyone that comes into contact with you, and even people that come into contact with the people that have come into contact with you. So what you're doing is really wonderful.

As a second little aside, I don't think any of them are here, but I wanted to really appreciate our maintenance department because they have been working so hard these last few days trying to get the water going again. They're working like eighteen-hour days down there in the bowels of the building, and I just wanted to appreciate them publicly for what they're doing.

What I want to talk about tonight is the five spiritual faculties. Another list. Sometimes I know it might seem endless—the eight this, the seven that, the five that, the four this. Not to try and remember them all or just sort them out. A friend of mine said recently, "Which one's the most important? I've got to figure out which one is the one I need to memorize and learn." Not to have it with that attitude at all. I relate to it as these are all different conceptual ways of talking about our spiritual development, the arising of insight, and relating to the specific work of practice that we're doing here. At any particular time one or the other might be a helpful guidepost or reference to you. I have particularly found these five qualities of mind to be very helpful to me in my own practice.

These five spiritual faculties, or controlling faculties, are so called because as they strengthen through our practice—and they do strengthen—and as they come into balance, which is very important, they come to exert a very powerful influence on our mind, determining the state of the mind at some points almost continuously. They also have a powerful influence on the way we live our lives when we're not in retreat.

These five qualities are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. The way I personally have found helpful to work with them is first in hearing about them, in reflecting on them, to develop a kind of recognition, an intuitive feeling for these qualities of mind—knowing when they're present, knowing when they're absent. When we've done that, we learn how to balance them with each other in a way that allows them to develop to their full potential in our minds. When they are balanced in this way and

strengthened, it's a very strong support for our practice and for our life.

The first of these qualities is faith. When I was reflecting on this, to me the two aspects of faith that come up that helped me get a feeling for this quality are the aspect of trust and the aspect of confidence.

Faith itself is totally basic to our being able to practice. None of us would be here if there had not been some faith in our hearts to bring us here, and none of us would stay here if faith did not keep being strengthened. Faith tends to arise at first perhaps when we encounter someone or something that really inspires us—someone whose way of being touches something deeply in us, or just a scene in nature that also touches something deep in us. Many different things can inspire faith, something that moves us. This type of faith really fills the mind with a sense of devotion, a sense of brightness, a sense of love and appreciation. We can experience it in different ways. It's a real brightness in the mind, and this is what we call bright faith. It can be very strong and deep and can motivate us in very powerful ways in our life. As I said, we wouldn't be here if we had not touched that in some deep way.

The problem is that like everything else, it's not stable. It doesn't last. It doesn't stay. While it can be incredibly strong at first and motivate us to do many things that we would have thought very difficult or impossible to do, it tends to lose its freshness. It tends to lose its power, its impelling force after a while. It needs to be strengthened because this type of faith is often referenced externally, looking to something outer to inspire the faith again. This is certainly valid, but it needs a lot of reiterations, and it's not strong enough to really keep us going sometimes in the darkest points that we come to.

What reinforces bright faith is the faith that comes from our own deep intuitive understanding of the nature of reality, the nature of suffering, impermanence—a deep intuitive understanding that comes from our own clear seeing. Perhaps we just see that we're able to experience our patterns of mind with more of a sense of freedom, more of a sense of spaciousness. It's not like you have to have the ultimate enlightenment experience to have verified faith.

But the small insights that we have, the possibility of more freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion—those are the kind of intuitive understandings that lead to verified faith.

So while bright faith, the original faith that triggered us off, can be very strong, because it's dependent on an external source for reinforcement, it can also be blind. It doesn't have a reference to our own inner experience of truth, and we can be led wildly astray. When the faith becomes verified by our own inner experience of truth, on all the different levels that we can experience that, it becomes, after a while, almost unshakable. Because what we know for ourselves, no one else can take away or can say isn't true. It doesn't need to be verified by anything external.

So faith and wisdom need to be balanced together. But since faith is not constant—even verified faith flickers—and short of deep realization, really deep enlightenment, how can we develop it? I find this a very interesting area of exploration, because there are lots of little tricks to develop concentration, to

work with mindfulness. But faith is so basic. Without it, it's so hard, if not impossible, to keep practicing. Yet it's not something one can give to somebody else.

This is where the quality of trust comes up very strongly in my mind when looking at developing faith. Trust meaning the ability to open to, to be connected to our experience in each moment, whatever that is. And the quality of mind that embodies that trust is one of total acceptance, or what a phrase that I really love—from a man who calls himself J. John Noe—*radical acceptance*. He says, "Radical acceptance is radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways. To let go, accept—it is necessary only to give up your concerns and your fears."

And Sayadaw U Pandita says the same thing. He says that unless there's softness and receptivity of mind, unless one totally surrenders, it will be almost impossible to receive anything. In surrendering to what is happening right now, total radical acceptance of what's happening right now.

So what are we resisting? Just looking in the mind and body right now, what are we resisting? What are we unwilling to receive in this moment, in our practice today? It can be very subtle.

When I was sitting recently in Australia, I was having a lot of very deep grief and sadness, which was impossible not to notice. And it was impossible not to note. So I was noting sadness, sadness, grief, grief. This was going on for days. And I thought I was really acknowledging it, really present, really accepting. But there was a very subtle sense of, you know, if I was really doing it right, this wouldn't be here. Very subtle. Just this tiny little aversion.

But that's enough. That subtle sense of, well, it's just not quite right if this is here—that is not trust. It prevents acceptance. It prevents being present in the moment. And it leads to lack of faith, because faith arises from our own clear seeing, and we can't see what on some level we won't accept, won't allow to be present.

There's a great difference between trusting in the moment just as it is, no matter what's happening, and subtly trying to arrange experience to meet our expectations. Even though those expectations may match all the things you hear in the dharma talks and all the things you read in the books, it doesn't matter. If you're trying to arrange your experience in any way, in any way, that's not trust.

The other thing about trust is that it's a very vital quality. It's not a static place that one reaches and then there's trust and then it's okay. Because our experience is changing so quickly, moment to moment, and acceptance, openness, must move with it. So each moment is opening to a new experience of whatever it is. It's very vital. It takes great commitment, great willingness to be present and open to whatever's arising in this moment. And as soon as it changes, opening to the next thing.

It can be very unsettling. Indeed, it *is* very unsettling. The tendency of the mind is often so strong to look for something solid, to make things secure, to make them safe. Just some place of firm foothold of

knowing—and then it'll be okay. And usually that firm foothold is going to be somewhere pleasant, and then it'll *really* be okay.

Krishnamurti says, "To seek the truth is to deny it." The search itself prevents trust. Because when we're looking elsewhere for anything, we can't be present with what is here. And what is here is what there is in this moment. That's all there is.

So how much of our time, on subtle levels, do we spend trying to find something to trust in? Not only in our life—which is a whole topic in itself—but on a day-to-day, hour-to-hour basis in our practice. Trying to restructure our environment, get the perfect sitting place, so then our sittings will be really concentrated. How often does one find oneself, after having a particularly clear walking period one day, the next day trying to recreate all the circumstances exactly the same way? Eating the same thing for lunch, taking the same amount of time before going down to the walking hall, holding the hands in the same way with the same amount of light. It's almost like a ritual, trying to recreate a certain experience. And then when the experience comes again—"Oh right, my faith is verified. There's trust."

It doesn't work that way. The trust comes first, because there's a total letting go into experience, into whatever's happening. Then the wisdom, the clear seeing, arises. And that wisdom does lead to more trust. But real trust doesn't come from having arranged things so that we have an experience we like. If we think we're trusting in that, we're going to be really devastated when the situation changes and something different happens.

So can we have trust without any conditions placed on it whatsoever? Total radical trust.

This is J. Krishnamurti again: "It's not a matter of whether or not faith is present in your life. It is. It's only a question of whether you place your faith in truth and reality, or in your considerations, your abstractions, your judgments, and your thoughts about truth and reality. Do not doubt that you are currently practicing faith. Consider only where it is placed."

Radical acceptance is the practice of faith.

And Sayadaw U Pandita again—I seem to like juxtaposing these two. He says, "Clinging to anything for security is like trying to scoop up water with a butterfly net." And that includes mind states, meditation states. It includes anything.

Another factor of faith or trust that can be difficult is that opening completely, trusting completely, being fully present with what is happening in this moment, often requires being with something that is quite difficult or unpleasant. I've been working with this factor a lot in myself recently. I have many unknown things going on in my body. I don't have any answers for it, and it's requiring a great deal of attention just to be present and see what's going on. Working with the quality of trust, I see how tricky it is—where one wants to be open to what's happening, but there's the subtle sense that real trust means when I get it right, then things get better.

That's not what it's about at all. It's about the willingness to totally open into the experience as it is and trust *that*—that this is the reality, and that it's okay. That one can be fully present with it no matter how unpleasant, how scary, or how contrary to one's ideas of what it means to live a life, to be spiritual, to meditate. Just how it is.

This willingness, as it develops in our practice, to open into the unknown in each moment, leads to the other aspect of faith: a strong sense of confidence. Confidence in one's own ability to be present for whatever's happening. Confidence in one's ability to practice. Confidence in the practice, in the Dhamma.

That confidence manifests as a willingness to come face to face with our experience, just as it is—our insecurities, our pains, whatever is arising in the moment. This confidence is also a quality of not hesitating, so that when some object arises, the mind goes forward to meet it right away, without confusion, without holding on to past experience, not afraid to face anything. Because of the quality of trust, one knows one is able to face anything, and that this is where the truth is—in this moment. There's nowhere else to go.

We begin to see that confrontation, even with our imperfections, can give rise to clear understanding. And this lends a lot of confidence and faith. So it's a kind of cycle. The faith leads to confidence, which leads to wisdom, which leads to more faith. We come to have a real sense of trust in our own strength, our own understanding, and our own willingness to be present for whatever arises.

This trust and confidence, this faith, is accessible even when the mind is cloudy, even when experience isn't what one wants it to be. It's not dependent on good noting or good meditation experiences. And we can learn to trust that much.

This faith lends a quality of real brightness and confidence to the mind. And this engenders a willingness to do, a willingness to confront things. This leads to the second spiritual faculty, which is the quality of energy or effort. Other ways of talking about it are enthusiasm, joyful effort, or heroic effort, as Michelle spoke about the other night. Commitment is a word I find helpful too.

I just want to say a little about effort because it's been discussed quite a bit before. As we know, energy is really the root of our ability to investigate, which is the root of our practice. And we see how hard it is to maintain energy when faith is lacking, because it takes so much effort to keep with the work, and if there's not some faith behind it, it's really hard to sustain.

I want to talk a little about the balance of effort, which most of us are constantly working with in our practice. I remember the first three-month course I did. I went to one of the teachers early on and said, "I just can't find the right balance of effort. I go too far one way, then too far the other." And he said, "Yeah, it'll be like that your whole practice." And he was right.

But it doesn't have to be a problem that it's like that. It stops being a matter of judging oneself—"Oh, I've blown it, I'm trying too hard," or "I kicked back, I took a nap, I've ruined the whole six weeks, I've got to

start over." It comes to be, for me actually, quite an interesting investigation—noticing how the balance of effort is working, when there's too much, when there's too little.

As you know, when there's not enough energy, the practice can become a total drag. You're dragging through the days, dragging the mind trying to note. It becomes tedious. These thoughts arise: "I really could be doing a lot better if I was anywhere else but here." And so doubt comes up really strong, and it can become a circular thing.

The reverse, I find, is that when the energy is flowing, when there's a real sense of connection with what's happening, the sense of really being fulfilled and connected in the practice—for me, this is not a function of nice objects arising or pleasant meditation states so much. I find it much more a function of the wholehearted quality of effort. When I'm feeling like I'm just there with what's happening—the effort simply to be present in the moment, not an effort of strain or striving, but just to be with what's happening—when that effort is wholehearted, it's like it doesn't matter what's going on. In some ways it matters; there's aversion and everything, but that's just noted too. There's a sense of real connectedness and commitment. And that comes when the effort is balanced, wholehearted.

Another important aspect of effort, I find, is that that wholehearted quality arises when it's generated from within ourselves, from within our own heart and mind. If we try to impose it from without—and for sure, often in the beginning we do have to impose it from without until we have the faith to keep going from within—but if we try to practice in conformity too strictly, to mesh ourselves into some kind of model of how we think our practice ought to look, to meet an ideal that's all outwardly imposed, at some point it just doesn't work. If it's not connecting with the inner energy, with our heart energy, the practice can become one of struggle and resistance. And that's often a sign that the effort is forced rather than coming from within, from our own interest and enthusiasm.

We all swing back and forth all the time, and we'll all have times when the energy is really low.

And I'm not implying that when energy is low one should say, "Well, I'll just kick back. It's low, I don't want to impose it from without, so I'll just wait until it springs from my heart and then I'll start practicing again." I wish it were so easy, but that's just not the facts. What we know is that effort does bring energy.

So in those periods when the energy is low, we shouldn't whip ourselves or say, "Okay, my energy is low, so I'm going to sit for three hours and walk for three hours and try not to sleep tonight until my energy comes back up, by God, and then I'll be able to practice." That could get a bit rigid. But neither should we give up. Not to just slack off, because it just gets harder and harder to get the energy moving again.

So working in the low energy times means continuing to note whatever's arising. And the noting may be weak and the object may not be clear, and that's okay. Don't be discouraged by that. As the effort continues—to just keep noting, keep trying to see what the object is, see it as clearly as possible—the energy will eventually begin to build. It's like the difference between one weak string in that first weak

noting, and as it continues, it's like a bunch of strings that get wound together and become very strong. The noting will become more clear. And as that happens, the interest will revive. The enthusiasm will come back and you'll be in a cycle again with stronger energy.

It's really helpful in the low energy periods to remember the importance of patience, because it plays a big factor in our practice. Another thing I've found very helpful is that though there's a difficult period or the energy's low, shrinking back from it or falling away from the practice in those times makes it much more difficult. It becomes so much harder to regenerate the momentum once we've actually taken a big chunk of time out. It might seem like there's no momentum going. It might seem like you're just dragging through. But there's more going on than might seem observable at first. And to stop altogether makes it much more difficult to kick in again.

Also, not to berate oneself for the quality of experience, which I find is very easy to do. Once again, when I was sitting in Australia, I went into U Pandita once and I was having a little fit of "Oh, everything's horrible, I can't see what's going on and there's nothing but fear and there's nothing but aversion and I can't really get to anything and none of the objects are clear"—and I tantrumed on like that for a little while. He just looked at me and said, "Well, can you note it?" I said, "Yeah, I can note it, but none of it's clear." And on and on I went. He said, "Are you lying about idle all day?" And I said, "Well, no, I'm sitting and walking all day. I can note the stuff." And he said, "So, what's your problem?"

So yeah, right. I just wanted it to be different. I wanted it to be nice. I wanted the energy to be strong. It really helped me a lot.

As we continue to work with the effort, with the continuing to note, continuing to connect with the object, that grows stronger and leads to a strengthening of mindfulness and a strengthening of concentration that follows on quite naturally. These are the next two spiritual faculties, controlling faculties.

Mindfulness is the factor that balances all the others. It's always helpful. It encompasses all our experience. There's nothing that's extra or outside of mindfulness or that doesn't count. One way of describing mindfulness is as observing power—a very specific definition. Observing power that rushes directly towards whatever object arises. You can almost experience it that way. An object arises in consciousness and the mind just rushes directly towards it without hesitation. Again, this comes from confidence and it comes from effort. But it rushes directly to it without hesitation, without thought. Immediately moves to and falls into the object. Covers it completely. It's not a matter of thinking about whether I want to pay attention to this object or not. In that thinking about it, the knowing of the object is missed. But the observing power has the quality of just taking possession of the object immediately, not slipping off. One example is that mindfulness is like pouring water into a cup. It doesn't just stay in one place, but it covers the whole surface.

It spreads out and covers the whole cup. And that's how mindfulness spreads out and covers the whole object, covers every part of whatever's arising. There's not a sense of discrimination or distinction that

some objects are more worth paying attention to, more worth giving mindfulness to than others.

Another quality of mindfulness is that it's non-coercive. It's completely non-violent, totally accepting. That quality of mindfulness is very active—that moving toward, completely covering, not slipping off. It's very active. But it's not trying to change what's happening at all. There's no sense of control, no sense of trying to change things, to make things different. It's just fully present with the thing as it is, without judging, totally accepting.

And that happens, that full sense of presence, when there's no discrimination of thought getting in between the movement of mindfulness toward the object. This mindfulness has, as I'm sure you've all observed by now, incredible power for leading to the unfolding of things that one would never have imagined or expected—just from sitting and watching object after object come and go in our experience when we're not controlling.

When we persevere with a continuity of this mindfulness—and it does take perseverance, these streams of moments of mindfulness building one after the other—the mind becomes more steady, calm, and clear. From this, the fourth faculty of concentration becomes strong, becomes quite well established.

The characteristic of concentration is that the mind sticks to the object without a lot of fluttering, movement, or wavering. It's just very steady on whatever the focus of consciousness is in that moment. It's a way of collecting all the mental forces, all the mental factors together in a moment, in one aspect, so that all our energy—which tends to be scattered, flying off in many different directions, and which we're often not aware of because it's so dispersed—becomes unified and focused on one thing. And that's very powerful. It leads to a mind that can be very calm, very quiet and peaceful. That sense of non-fragmentation, that sense of unity, gives such a feeling of completeness. That's why there's such a sense of happiness that can come with concentration—a kind of happiness much different from the happiness of sense pleasure, say, the happiness of eating a peach. That unity of mind is very powerful.

In talking about concentration, I feel we must be cautious not to set it up as some goal—this is what a concentrated mind is like, and this is what I need to have in order to practice. That can lead to a lot of suffering. I know from personal experience. Concentration is not something to arrive at at some future point. We're working with developing it right now, just in this moment. It's not a matter of getting concentrated for the next hour or concentrated for the next minute. Just in this moment, can the mindfulness really move right to whatever the object of attention is? Can the attention stick there, stay there steadily? Just connect with this one object. That's all. Not to make it a big project to fill our days with—getting concentrated so that tonight I'll be really concentrated. But just bring it back to this moment of awareness, this moment of connecting and sticking with the object.

In Vipassana, what we're working with is a steadiness of attention to a flow of changing objects, as opposed to, say, just staying with the breath and never moving from it. We're cultivating a steadiness of attention, but the objects are constantly changing. It's helpful to know we don't need to limit ourselves by

thinking that concentration is only possible when certain types of objects are arising, or that it's only possible in certain situations. That steadiness of mind can be developed under possibly a broader range of circumstances than we might expect.

If you're feeling really unfocused or a lot of discouragement, know that there's a lot of judgment that comes up around concentration. Many people I talk to will come and say, "Well, I'm really not concentrated." What does that mean? One just makes up an idea of what it means to be concentrated, then decides one isn't it, and then gets really discouraged about it and suffers a lot. To some extent there's a lot of concentration in almost anyone's mind here. How many people can just sit for an hour without a great deal of focus and concentration? Or walk for an hour, never mind sitting and walking for six weeks. There's a lot of concentration.

So not to give in—if there's discouragement, rather than thinking, "Because it's discouragement, the energy is low, I can't concentrate," let the discouragement itself become the object of attention, the object of inquiry.

Keep bringing the noting mind back to it. Note the sensations in the body. Really let the trust come in that this is the reality of the moment. And with that trust can come real attention, effort, energy. By continuing this effort of noting and being with the discouragement, that's the object in the moment, the mindfulness again restabilizes. Concentration again becomes strengthened, using discouragement as an object. It doesn't have to only be the breath. And that's again seeing that nothing is outside the scope of practice.

What we find as we go along in practice is that the mind might still go off and get creamed or get really lost. But the restabilization process might take much less time, and it might be much less of a period of confusion and despair. Often we lose sight of that because it still seems really intense when it happens. But what threw you for three days two weeks into the retreat might be a bubble of intense confusion that lasts for an hour or an hour and a half now. And that itself is a product of increasing mindfulness and concentration.

So concentration brings calmness, depth, and steadiness, and it must be balanced with effort, which brings energy and clarity. I'll talk about that more in a minute.

Then out of these qualities of mindfulness and concentration, the fifth factor, the fifth faculty of wisdom, will arise. It does arise. It arises of itself. It's not something one can sit down and make happen.

By wisdom, I mean intuitive, deep intuitive understanding. While concentration clarifies and purifies the mind—when we're mindful, when we're concentrated, greed, hatred, and delusion are not present in those moments—and that lends a real strength to the mind, it really purifies the mind. But it's not enough to eradicate deep underlying tendencies for greed, for anger, for fear, for ignorance to arise. What eradicates those is understanding, wisdom.

Nyanaponika says that greed, hatred, and delusion are abandoned not by acts, not by doing things, but by

wisely seeing. And this wise seeing unfolds of itself through our being fully present with object after object as it arises, with trust, acceptance, and steadiness of mind.

Classically, the intuitive wisdom I'm talking about is a deep, visceral understanding of the nature of impermanence, the nature of unsatisfactoriness, the nature of the insubstantiality of self—of the sense of self—that there's nothing solid anywhere to be called "I." It's not that this happens all at once. We all have varying levels and degrees of insights, of understanding happening over and over. It's as if we experience the same thing over and over on deeper and deeper levels. And each of those seeings adds to our faith, to our deep intuitive understanding of the way things are.

And it can be experienced more or less directly. A metaphor that I really like: it's like seeing a light at night in the distance. You don't actually see the fire, but because of the reflection of the light, one knows without doubt that there's a fire there. That's one way of experiencing understanding. And then the actual seeing of the fire itself is likened to liberation.

In the unfolding of this wisdom, the quality of investigation is very important. But investigation is not the same as thinking. This deep intuitive wisdom is not coming from thought. It's not coming from feeling. I think this is a place where we can often be caught, confusing thinking with understanding, with wisdom. We often take thinking about something to be the understanding itself. But wisdom can only arise from direct experience, experience beyond thought.

One place I find we can easily be caught is when we have Dharma thoughts. We would all agree that thinking about the past, thinking about the future—what am I going to do when I go home in three months?—we know that's thinking, and sometimes we get caught in it. But when the thought's a Dharma thought, somehow that often doesn't count. We can easily be misled into thinking it's real wisdom.

A concept I find very helpful in learning not to get caught is that of wise attention. Wise attention is based on the fact that when our attention is directed fully in one direction, it can't be so focused on something else. That's pretty basic and simple. With wise attention, keeping that in mind...

We can learn to take real care of where we give attention, where we give energy in any given moment. And with wise attention we can learn to direct the energy, the attention to the process rather than the content, no matter what the content is.

For example, you're sitting and you have some very blissful experience in meditation. And then the thought arises, "Wow, this is great." Then there's pleasantness, and you note the pleasantness. And you note, "Oh, well, it's impermanent. It'll go away." And you note that. And then you think, "Wow, the practice is really working. I didn't get attached to that." And it goes into more thoughts about impermanence. "It's really incredible. The Dharma is really fantastic. And it's really working because I'm not caught in this." And on into deep thoughts about the nature of impermanence and the power of that in changing one's life and the quality of existence now that impermanence is understood. These are really far out thoughts and

on some level very helpful. But this is getting caught in dharmic thoughts, in the content. It's not wisdom. That moment of intuition, of seeing the nature of impermanence—that's a deep intuitive understanding.

Wise attention would be directing the energy not to the thoughts but seeing them as a thought and directing the energy back to the process. A thought is a thought no matter what the content is. And so we don't give favoritism to certain thoughts because the content is so inspiring.

I find that this takes a lot of trust. The trust being that the deep insights we have are not based on thought, and we don't need to cling to thoughts about them in order to hold on to the understanding, the wisdom. A real trust that insight has arisen, it's passed, and now another thought is arising in this moment—and to be able to see it as a thought and just note it.

I heard a Tibetan Lama give a talk a couple of weeks ago and he gave a great simile about working with thoughts. He said if you throw a stone at a lion, it'll just sit there. It won't even look at the stone. It'll just look right at you, where the stone came from. If you throw a stone at a dog, it goes running after the stone and doesn't even stop to look at you. That's how we often are with our thoughts. A thought comes flying by and we run after it. Then another one comes and we run after it. We're just running around in circles. So can we not be misled by the stone but keep our attention steady on the process and not fly off after thoughts?

From this we begin to see, we come to recognize that actually our minds are incredibly unreliable. The thoughts that come up are totally unreliable. They're unreliable because we continue to perceive the permanent in what is constantly changing. We continue to look for happiness where it only brings us suffering. And the mind and thoughts continue to see a self, to try and construct a self out of what is insubstantial. We don't have to keep buying into this. We can see it happening over and over and over. And that's fine—it's a thought. We don't have to run after the thought when it comes.

From these direct experiences of wisdom, faith is strengthened and the whole cycle starts over again.

So those are the five faculties and how to work with balancing them. Faith and wisdom are two faculties that we work at balancing with each other. They serve as a natural balance. If there's a lot of wisdom without faith, it can manifest in really two ways. One is a kind of false wisdom where there's a lot of thinking, a lot of imagining, maybe inferential knowing. One really thinks one knows, one thinks one understands, but it's really more from hearsay than direct experience. You think you know without really looking.

It's a kind of conceit. And this can grow very easily into skeptical doubt, into an unwillingness to actually look. There's no faith in this at all.

The second form of how wisdom can be unbalanced without faith is when there is real intuitive wisdom arising, a real insight. But without faith, it can turn shallow. It can lead to too much thinking about it—what I was just describing of having the insight but not having the confidence, not having the clarity to

be able to let go of the insight and continue with the practice. Without faith, the mind gets caught up in a lot of thinking, a lot of running around in circles, afraid to let go of the thought. And again, doubt will arise, disguised this time as investigating power. Because often when we're having these really interesting dharmic thoughts, it seems that we're really investigating into the nature of things. And it can easily lead to skeptical doubt.

When this happens, we tend to lose energy. The mind starts to waver more, can become a bit indecisive, and begins to have a lack of clarity. And from this, of course, can come disappointment or a sense that the practice isn't working—"I don't see the benefit of the practice"—and doubt is really in strong again. What's lacking here is faith's quality of commitment, of clarity. In these moments, it's important to remember that every moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom, and to just keep going, even though it seems that the clarity has come lacking. Just keep going.

On the other side, faith needs to be balanced by wisdom. Because faith can be too excessive. It's kind of, "Wow, this is it! I really know the answer!" It's so enthusiastic, really over the top. The kind where you sit and think about how you're going to turn everyone you know onto the Dharma, and you really go through these great Dharma talks in your mind, and you've really done wonderful things. But you can't practice. There's just so much faith, but there's not the balance of wisdom to keep one going. There's no discriminating judgment.

The simile for the balance of these two is like a real turbulent river. There's a group of people on the bank, and they really need to cross to the other side. When there's a lot of wisdom without enough faith, it's all these people running up and down the banks of the river looking very busy and important, but they're not getting anything done. There's no results. The person with too much faith might boldly plunge into the river, but maybe not in a very wise way, to the point that energy gets frittered away. Maybe they get washed away, or they're just floundering in the river. They're very courageous, but without the discriminating wisdom to do it in a way that helps.

The balance of the two would have the courage and conviction to plunge boldly in, but the judgment to be able to do it in a way that brings oneself and others to safety. This is the balance we work with between confidence, real trust, and a discriminating wisdom and understanding that backs up the faith—so that the faith isn't blind and our energy isn't uselessly frittering away.

So wisdom and faith are balanced with one another. Concentration and energy need to be balanced with one another. And this is one I'm sure you're all familiar with, day after day in your own practice—balancing the calmness and depth of concentration with the energy and clarity of effort.

When there's an unbalanced effort, an excess of energy, the mind can become really restless or really scattered. It's as if the consciousness and the object can't stay together. The consciousness hits the object and flies off, or it seems to leap past it. There's not a sense of real connection. So if your mind is kind of slipping off what it's trying to pay attention to, it's a good sign that there's too much energy, too much

effort going on. At this point, it's very helpful to simplify. Simplify the number of objects you're noting in your sitting. Simplify the walking—just lifting, placing, or just stepping, stepping. Don't try to note a lot of different objects. If you're doing touch points, don't try to do a lot. Just simplify when the energy is too high.

If there's a deficiency of energy in proportion to concentration, again, you'll find the mind kind of drifting along with the rise and fall, very comfortable, very nice, and very sleepy after a while. Sayadaw U Pandita likened it to a mind that solidifies like butter—unfresh and slimy. You need to heat it up with energy, so it's real supple again.

And at that point, it can be helpful to work with very precise aiming and very precise timing of noting the object, and with very clear noting, because it takes more effort and that brings in a little more energy. You may need to add a couple of touch points and more objects because that also picks up the effort. It brings in more energy. Be sure that you're balancing the sitting with walking if the mind is getting more concentration than energy.

And really important to remember—it's all skillful means. It's not a judgment that there's something wrong with one's practice or wrong with you. It's just the natural course of things. That balance is a very fine line, and since conditions are constantly changing, so is the balance. And it can be a real—I find it a very interesting, fascinating place of practice to just investigate these qualities and see when it's tipping one way and tipping the other way. It becomes very skillful, and there's no judging necessary in it at all. It's just really a continual learning, a continual refining of our understanding of the nature of these energies as they manifest in our mind.

So wisdom balanced with faith, energy balanced with concentration, and mindfulness is kind of like the overseer. You can't have too much mindfulness. It can't be unbalanced unless—well, it would be unbalanced if you don't have any. You could bring a little in. But it can't get out of balance any other way. It serves as a balance for everything.

So these are the five spiritual faculties. And I've just found it very helpful working with them in my own practice. And as we continue in our practice, these faculties will become more balanced, more refined, and really grow in strength and power. They develop into quite strong powers in our mind that affect our lives far beyond our time sitting here at IMS. I've found that they really contribute to an enduring clarity of mind, enduring steadiness of mind. A trust that goes beyond just sitting. The ability to trust in the moment. To trust in our own understanding. And a wisdom that really changes our relationship to our lives and to our experience far beyond what happens just sitting here.

So this is much more than faculties of mind that we develop from meditation. They affect our whole life in very deep and powerful ways.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.