Spiritual Faculties - read by Fínola O'Síochrú

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For the past few evenings we've been exploring the Brahma Viharas, which describe the ways wisdom is expressed in our relationship with others. Tonight I want to take a step back into our individual psyche and look at the strengths that develop from our practice. These are described as the five spiritual faculties, and they are mindfulness, energy, concentration, faith, and wisdom.

We mentioned these already in relation to the seven factors of enlightenment, and this talk also provides a bit of revision on these factors that develop as we meditate. Remember the wild geese analogy? Mindfulness was in the lead, followed in the slipstream by a calming trio headed up by concentration, then following on were equanimity and tranquility. Pressing ahead on the wide flank were the stimulating factors of energy, investigation, and joy.

The leading trio of mindfulness, concentration, and energy have joined us again in the spiritual faculties. This time they are accompanied by wisdom and faith. The seven factors describe the skills used during Vipassana, while the spiritual faculties describe the strengths built from our meditation practice, which can then be used in daily life or during challenges in meditation when equanimity, joy, and tranquility desert us.

Let's take an example. Suppose you're at the social welfare office to find out why your payment hasn't arrived this month. The person you normally deal with has been transferred, and the newcomer can't find your file. After consulting with others, he shrugs his shoulders and says you'll have to reapply for all your benefits. A button pops inside you and rage boils up. Which of the seven factors will come to your aid in this situation?

Your mind won't be equanimous, tranquil, or joyful, and you won't be investigating the transitory nature of experience. Thus, four of the seven factors of enlightenment are missing. But you can be mindful and focus your full attention on the interaction with the official, while summoning the energy needed to prevent yourself throttling the officer who is smiling innocuously, happy to have ticked off another client from his list. We still have the three leaders in the wild geese: mindfulness, concentration, and energy.

To back these up, you could remind yourself that speaking out of anger never helps. This is your accumulated store of wisdom, calming the storm of passion that's exploding within you. You might also be encouraging yourself that things will work out somehow. This is the faith or confidence that accrues from practice and helps us see the silver lining within the storm clouds. So the spiritual faculties are the benefits that accrue from honing the seven factors of enlightenment.

Here is an analogy. An ice skater would use skills like balance, physical strength, grace, and expressivity while skating. Some of these, like strength and grace for example, will accumulate as personal capacities that are useful in daily life. The skater's off-ice life will also benefit from related offshoots such as physical fitness and the confidence that comes from developing a skill. Just as ice skating requires a very special set of skills and circumstances, the factors of enlightenment describe the skills involved in maintaining the pretty exalted state we achieve in Vipassana. But the accumulated strengths from both activities help us in a very down-to-earth way. Thus the spiritual faculties provide the qualities we need to turn our welfare office encounter—and all aspects of ordinary daily life—into a spiritual practice. They also come to the fore during turgid, unexalted times in formal meditation while we're threading our way through the hindrances.

Let's go through the five spiritual faculties in more detail and look especially at how to apply these during challenges.

Mindfulness describes our capacity to be conscious of present moment experience such as physical sensations, sounds, sights, emotions, and thoughts. Although this capacity is natural, we generally ignore whatever is impacting on our senses and instead follow the dictates of whatever thoughts we concoct in our busy minds. During meditation, we train ourselves to experience life at a simpler level than that engendered by the filter of thoughts and beliefs.

In meditation, we usually start by placing attention on the physical sensations of breathing. Then we might notice the pleasure of relaxing from our usual busyness. Bringing the pleasure center stage, we might see that it has the emotional tone of contentment alongside pleasurable physical sensations associated with relaxation. After a while we may grow sleepy, so we broaden our attention to notice our posture and the sensations that register as we straighten the spine to prevent ourselves falling asleep. In all this we are honing the skill of mindfulness, training our minds to register present experience rather than be ensnared in our mental concoctions.

One strength that builds from this training is a capacity to see through our mental filters in daily life. In our welfare office scenario, the faculty of mindfulness will help us register rage as part of the objective reality of the situation. Without mindfulness the rage would take us over, and our minds would only see reality through its filter. Thus the official would, in our minds, become horrible, lazy, incompetent, and all the other labels rage places upon him. We might suddenly realize that the whole welfare system is unfair, infuriating, stupid, and so on. Our speech and behavior will then follow the habit pattern we've built up to deal with conflict. For some, this will mean banging fists on the counter or bellowing into the ears of the official, giving them a perfect excuse to refuse to deal with this further. For others, it would mean channeling all the emotional energy into assertiveness. For others it could mean a collapse into livid despair as we take the forms home to commence the wearying search for documents, all the time cursing the official and the system and whatever else crosses our path.

With mindfulness we will feel the surge of rage as it surfaces. While all the nasty labels may get stamped on the official and the situation, there is also some objectivity about these. We know that our vision and thoughts are being colored. This gives us some choice in what happens next. For example, we could decide to take a few mindful breaths to help us calm down a bit. If we've done a lot of practice, we'll be able to acknowledge some of the complexity of emotions and feelings being generated. There may be a physical tension in our face or throat, our eyes may be popping, our brows furrowed, our jaw stiff. There may be the heady buzz that energizes us in conflict situations and a strong sense of self.

To the extent that these are registered consciously, their hold over us is reduced and the ill-will driving our response is tempered.

While the Dhamma doesn't give us any prescription for how to deal with conflicting situations like this, mindfulness allows us to learn our own unique best strategy, to find pathways which transform the energy of anger into assertiveness. Although the ingrained reactionary habit might still be ninety-nine percent in control of the situation, we have that one percent of mindfulness reminding us of anger as part of the objective reality. And even if our behaviour follows its usual route, we will at some stage be able to reflect on the situation and learn some lessons.

Let's now look at the faculty of concentration. This is not the furrowed brow concentration required for school work. It refers to our ability to select out some aspect of experience and rest attention there.

There are two levels of concentration which are of particular interest here. The first describes a mind that is approaching its focus. In meditation we might be encouraging ourselves to focus on the sensations of breathing, aware of lots of other sensations, feelings and the mind state in the background, but centring our attention on the breath. The analogy used to describe this is a bee hovering around a flower, following it back and forth in the breeze, waiting for the right moment to alight. This type of concentration is termed *vitakka*, or applied thought. The word "thought" here does not mean that we think about the sensations of breathing. It means we bring our intelligence and curiosity to bear on these sensations.

At the next level of concentration, termed *vicāra* or sustained thought, the bee has landed and is sucking nectar. This type of concentration is more restful. We're no longer making the effort to keep our mind steady. We're now absorbed in the experience of breathing.

Concentration works hand in hand with mindfulness, giving the mind a specific focus for awareness—for example, the sensations of breathing or walking. These sensations provide a good resting place for the mind during formal meditation and also during quiet moments in daily life. This helps us to let go of the stress that easily builds up during ordinary life.

But in situations where we need to be actively engaged, it's a good habit to be more broadly aware. Very often the external situation we find ourselves in provides sufficient draw for our attention, so concentration happens quite naturally. For example, while we are actually talking to the official in the

welfare office, our minds will be quite focused on the exchange, so we don't need to use any noting word or phrase to remind ourselves to be aware of present experience. This is the equivalent of *vicāra* in vipassanā—we are absorbed within the experience and do not need to encourage our minds to focus.

But in idle moments the mind might wander, for example, while waiting in the queue or while the official was searching for a file. Just as in formal meditation, when we wake up and notice we've been wandering, we can simply remind ourselves of what's going on and encourage ourselves to keep coming back to that reality. You could simply focus on sensations, which will have a calming effect. But if you tend to be dreamy, it could help to remind yourself of the job at hand. A broad brush phrase like "welfare office, asking why no benefit received" could be used to marshal your energies for the task ahead. It will need a degree of effort to keep the mind focused. So this is the daily life equivalent of *vitakka*, or applied thought, in vipassanā.

It is worthwhile reflecting on the fact that we mostly don't use a phrase like "welfare office, asking why no benefit received" to help us through our day. This reflects the preference for our minds to drift and autopilot, rather than make conscious decisions and be mindful as we carry out our decisions. In effect, this lets us ignore the underlying motivations for much of our daily lives.

For example, our trip to the welfare office might have followed automatically from annoyance that the usual payment hadn't been received. We will be carrying that annoyance unwittingly into the office and it will probably show up as an edge to our voice as we explain the problem. This is a form of aggression, and in turn the official will react to that, becoming less sympathetic to our case.

Using a noting word in vipassanā sharpens our perceptions and helps us to see things in more detail. Similarly, noting phrases such as "welfare office, asking why no benefit received" will sharpen our perceptions in daily life. This way we will notice the emotional baggage driving us.

This brings us to the third of the spiritual faculties: energy. We'll have noticed the anger driving us to the welfare office. Is that a good enough motive? Hopefully we'll have enough wisdom to say no. To relinquish the anger we need the faculty of energy.

The spiritual faculty of energy is the momentum behind right effort. For spiritual progress, we need to make the effort to undermine unskillful qualities like anger and develop skillful ones like *mettā*. It takes enormous energy to make these changes. An apt metaphor the Buddha gives is that of swimming upstream. We're continually having to work against our ingrained conditioning.

We practise swimming upstream in vipassanā. No matter how often the mind wanders, we refuse to give up. We start again. No matter how sleepy we feel, we resist the temptation to lie down. Each time we make those efforts to start again, to keep the sleepy eyes open, to resist the urge to fidget, we are strengthening our spiritual faculty of energy.

One benefit from all this hard work is that in daily life we will have the energy to undermine old

habits—for example, on the way to the welfare office. Seeing the anger driving us is already to undermine it.

Anger may be churning within, making our blood boil, but so long as it's contained within the gaze of awareness, it can't do any harm. We can then choose a skilful motive for our trip—for example, "May I look after myself well in this situation." This lets the whole sorry business become part of our spiritual life. It will help us appreciate any positives in the situation. Our friendly outlook may even touch into the heart of officialdom, motivating them to make a more thorough search for our file. Even if the outcome is exactly the same, we will have undermined our habit of acting out of anger. So the encounter will have been a rich one in terms of our spiritual life.

To recap: the faculty of mindfulness, honed during Vipassana as we bring our minds back again and again to present experience, gives us a degree of objectivity in our daily life. The faculty of concentration gathers our often scattered attention so that instead of jumping all over the place or only vaguely aware of what we're doing, we can focus on each task at hand. As we do so, mindfulness lets our underlying motivations become more apparent. The faculty of energy then comes to the fore, resisting the strong current of unskilfulness, swimming upstream with skilful good wishes. With the three faculties working together, they simplify life and bring out the best in all situations.

The autopilot mind tends to complicate things, building monsters and fairy tales in every idle moment, stoking our underlying and unacknowledged passions, poisoning the attitude with which we approach others. While we're waiting in the queue at the welfare office, annoyance could be prompting grandiose plans of how we would reorganise the system if only we were in charge. If we don't notice this, we'll unwittingly carry our annoyance and disapproval into the encounter with the official. But if we wake up and remind ourselves of our present reality—welfare office, asking why payment not received—this has the effect of focusing the mind. Thus the energy of anger is transformed into assertiveness and channelled into rightful business. If we can then add a good wish such as "May I look after myself happily," we'll achieve the crowning glory of a positive outlook.

Now let's look at the faculties of faith and wisdom.

Wisdom lets us discern which motivations are helpful and which are unskilful. Wisdom would remind us that acting out of anger doesn't help in that welfare office. We might undervalue such an obvious statement, thinking, "Well, everyone knows that." But if everyone truly knew that, there wouldn't be petty squabbles or gang feuds or murders. It's one thing to know that acting out of anger doesn't help when we're calmly reflecting on life in the comfort of home—well fed, warm, and healthy. It's quite another thing to believe that same fact and act upon it when we're cold and hungry, when someone pushes our buttons, insults us, or assaults us.

Meditation practice opens many avenues for such wisdom. One comes from seeing how much anger hurts us. We learn this when we have the patience to sit still with angry thoughts and open up to the full

experience of the emotional storm. Tensions develop in various parts of the body. Our thoughts tighten us into a knot of self-righteousness and blame. We explode into rage or shrink into a livid pot of hatred. Eventually, though, the emotion burns itself out. As it does so, we sense the hurt lurking beneath our anger. That hurt is what really needs acknowledgement. Once we've done so, our thoughts become more rational and we somehow come to terms with the situation. On reflection, we see that the bout of anger had been deepening the hurt within ourselves. It hadn't done anything to help the situation. The more often we sit through anger and feel its raw energy, the less easily are we seduced by its appealing thoughts of vengeance and glorious triumph over our opponents.

One very easy mistake to make is to denounce ourselves for anger and suppress all its energy, persuading ourselves we're not really angry. We need to find the middle way: feeling the anger, acknowledging it, relaxing right into the heart of it, but dropping the thoughts and beliefs it suggests moment after moment, thought after thought. This way we learn to appreciate the raw energy stimulated by aversion—the way it straightens our spine, makes us razor-sharp alert. Dropping the thoughts prompted by ill-will, this raw energy can be channelled into assertiveness. The strong sense of self stimulated by aversion is then free to think friendly thoughts of goodwill and compassion without an unhelpful peppering of hatred or ill-will.

A word about aversion and the wisdom that can be associated with it. Aversion becomes a hindrance when we identify with it, clinging to thoughts like "You're bad, you're wrong," and building up a mental case to justify all this. Our practice with anger, ill-will, resentment, and all the other emotions stimulated by aversion helps us drop the identification. But the basic discernment of an unpleasant situation can still be registered. The difference is that we can now act on this dispassionately.

Going back to the welfare office example, we register the unpleasant implications of our file having been lost—that we won't have any money coming in, the burden of having to find all our documents, write to previous employers, and so on. There's also the disappointment that the system has failed. All of these are valid judgments of the situation. They're a part of the truth that needs to be acknowledged. So aversion, in the sense of recognising an unpleasant feeling or situation, is not a problem. The Buddha himself registered aversion when he first thought about teaching others the way to enlightenment. He reflected that it would simply leave him vexed, because the truth was too subtle for others to understand.

As the story goes, he needed to be persuaded by the god Brahma that some people had but little dust in their eyes and would be able to follow his lead to enlightenment. Realizing there was some point to the undertaking, he could then frame any vexation as worthy within the overall picture. This allowed him to say many years later that when people rejected his teaching, he experienced equanimity. He could register the unwelcome fact that they were rejecting what he held dear and instead choosing dukkha, but could then let them go their own way in peace.

Wisdom allows aversive situations to be known as unfortunate, unpleasant, unwanted—but embraced with equanimity. Wisdom is also what saves us in the welfare office. To the extent that we've taken the

truth of dukkha on board, we know that everything is unreliable, that everything and everyone fails sooner or later. We know that reacting against this makes things worse. We know that the way through difficulties is to embrace them fully. So we don't take the situation as a personal insult or loss. We embrace it as a step on our path of enlightenment.

Wisdom accrues from seeing the three characteristics: anicca or transience, anatta or not-self, and dukkha, suffering. Experiencing and reflecting upon the transient, ephemeral nature of all experience, we gradually disentangle ourselves from dukkha. We see how identifying with our feelings and emotions intensifies their power, how the mind concocts stories out of nothing, creates mountains out of molehills. When we see through the false identity, the once powerful emotion reveals itself as a mass of sensations and feelings without any coherent rationale. What was the point of clinging to all that, we wonder?

The absence of a storyline becomes more appealing than our usual insistence on rehashing our point of view. Something about the quiet spaces between sensations, thoughts, and mind states starts to call our attention. We feel ourselves more and more attracted to that absence of drama. And for its sake, we become increasingly willing to let go of our usual desire for pleasure, for things going my way.

We might not be able to put any words to this wisdom. It's a loosening of the ties that bind us to suffering. It is expressed not so much in words but as a way of interacting with the world. We're more willing to experience life at the level of basic sensation than through the veil of our interpretations and ideas. This loosens the absolutist black-and-white stance we so often adopt in challenging situations. Instead of acting out habitual behavior patterns again and again, we're looking for the escape route, the way back to peace.

Our muscles relax a bit easier in stressful situations. Our emotions become more apparent and thereby less overpowering. As our emotional armor cracks, whispers of thoughts like "it never pays to act out of anger" can be registered. We might find ourselves clinging to the thought for dear life as a storm of rage blasts us with its fury.

Wisdom is what suggests the thought: it never pays to act out of anger. Faith keeps our hearts up as the storm of anger counters with a barrage of objections. "Of course I should be angry. I need to be angry. He'll walk all over me unless I let fly," and so on. Our problem is that we don't know how to make good of the situation. So wisdom has nothing more to offer other than its original suggestion—acting out of anger won't help. When wisdom runs out, faith steps into the breach.

The Pali word for faith is saddhā. This can also be translated as confidence. We're not talking here about blind faith in dogma; we're talking about a heartfelt trust in what inspires our confidence. At the start of our spiritual journey, we place our faith in whatever spark got us going. It may have been something we read, or someone who inspired us to give it a try. It may just have been a hunch, or even desperation—sensing that there must be something other than the world of indulgence, individuality, success and failure.

That initial inspiration or desperation can be very powerful. It gives us the energy to seek out a teacher, a retreat, a meditation group. It gets us started on our spiritual quest. In time, however, the initial brightness fades. The teacher doesn't seem so alluring. Retreats are tough. People in the meditation group start to annoy us. Our disappointment crystallizes as doubt.

Unless we've learned to recognize and work with doubt, we'll give up at this point. We could go off in search of another path, a more inspiring teacher, a more congenial meditation group. But the same pattern of inspiration followed by disappointment will repeat itself until we learn to work through our doubts. As we do so, faith develops. At times, doubt can turn to self-doubt. We think that we're too dim-witted, or too self-centered, or too angry.

And that's why the Dhamma doesn't seem to be making any impact on our lives. Again, the spectre has to be embraced. The certainties—"too dim-witted," "no impact"—need to be examined mindfully as part of our present experience. What other aspects of experience can we notice? Tensions perhaps? Emotions like despair or self-hatred? Can we muster the energy to sit through these? Would it help to talk with a friend or a teacher? All teachers will have come through such trials, and may be able to encourage you to embrace the spectre of self-doubt, trusting that, like all spectres, it will at times dissolve into thin air, leaving you wondering: what was that all about?

As we work our way mindfully through the hindrances, our initial bright faith transforms into a deep, heartfelt confidence in ourselves and in the path we have chosen. Faith and wisdom work hand in hand. Wisdom represents our understanding of the Dhamma. Faith represents our willingness to embrace it. Faith is energising, heartfelt, a joyous movement towards truth. Wisdom discerns the dukkha of clinging and persuades us to let go. Without wisdom, we would cling to faith, become a zealot, insisting on our dogma. Without faith, wisdom gets stuck in detail rather than taking the scary step into the unknown.

When the two are working in tandem, wisdom asks us to choose the middle way, to abandon reactivity and loosen our clutch on habitual patterns. Faith heartens us in this unfamiliar territory, lets us trust that some beneficial way forward will emerge. Thus wisdom and faith, along with the other spiritual faculties of mindfulness, concentration and energy, can steer us through our bout of rage that emerges in the welfare office.

There's no saying how the situation will unfold. After a few seconds of gallant resistance, anger might break through anyhow. Or we might become confused, unable to deal with the situation at all, as the next person in the queue shoves us out of the way. We might break down and cry. Or we might find something useful to say. No matter what happens, we've made an attempt to break an old habit in a very challenging situation, and that will stand to us greatly in spiritual terms.

I had some strange experiences the first few times I consciously tried to break unskilful communication habits in conflict situations. My natural habit is to withdraw, say nothing, but be privately disgusted with the other person. The first time I found the courage to say something in protest, I ended up speaking

nonsense. I couldn't understand what I was saying myself, never mind expecting the other person to make sense of it. I then had to endure my adversary saying, "Calm down, love, let me explain," as he summarily dismissed every basis for my complaint. So that didn't work out too well. But it showed me the magnitude of the task I was facing in learning a new habit of assertiveness.

The next time I tried was when someone was giving me a blast of their anger. Although I felt cowed and wanted to withdraw into a disgusted silence, I knew I should change the pattern, say something to stand up for myself. Again what came out was pure nonsense. It wasn't even an English sentence. After a few seconds I found myself apologising, saying, "I don't know what I'm trying to say." But this time my incoherence had the desired effect. My adversary, probably sensing my distress, calmed down and apologised for his own outburst of anger. We were then able to talk rationally about the problem and come to an amicable agreement.

So we needn't expect our spiritual life to unfold in a dignified way. But somehow our unskilful habits change for the better and we become more able to address life's challenges and appreciate its beauties.

To finish, I'd like to recap the qualities we're developing here on retreat and how these link with the spiritual faculties which we need for everyday life. In vipassanā we are developing the seven factors of enlightenment. The three leading factors of mindfulness, concentration and energy become habits that we can take into our ordinary lives. Mindfulness anchors our attention in reality, saves us from daydreaming or worrying our lives away. Sights, sounds and all our sense data become meaningful experiences in which our busy minds can rest and recuperate. This grounding in reality gives us some objectivity on the baggage we bring into stressful situations and thereby the possibility of letting go. The faculty of concentration focuses our attention on the task at hand, lets us become more effective in our lives rather than scattered and superficial. The faculty of energy gives us the wherewithal to breast the current of unskilful habits and swim upstream with our skilful ones.

The next factors developed in vipassanā are investigation and equanimity. Their benefit shows up within the faculty of wisdom. As we investigate our experience in vipassanā, it sinks in ever deeper that greed, hatred and delusion hurt us in many ways. We bring that wisdom with us into daily life where it persuades us not to act out old habits of suffering. With equanimity, wisdom gets some weight and can steady us through a storm of passion. The thought, "It never pays to act out of anger," is only a fleeting thought. As already mentioned, anger will immediately counter with arguments like, "He'll walk all over me unless I blow my top." We can feel the attraction towards these thoughts, the strong, powerful sense of self they conjure up, the sweet sensations they release in our bodies.

Our certainty that anger doesn't help will be shattered unless equanimity steadies us against anger's counter-revolution.

While wisdom relates mainly to our rational mind, the faculty of faith is based in feeling rather than the intellect. It is a heartfelt confidence in our path. Thus, it relates closely to the final pair in the factors of

enlightenment: joy and tranquility.

To the extent that we've developed joy in Vipassana, our hearts will be open to the joy of faith. We will be glad to have a practice we can trust, a path to follow. Joy lifts the spirit, lets us become more confident in ourselves and in our chosen path. It gives momentum to our faith.

The spiritual path leads us toward quiet waters where we're asked to surrender much of what we normally prize—pleasure and stimulation, striving to get on top of things, being noticed, being a success, having a story to tell. We're going against the values of our culture here, and this would really test our faith unless we develop a degree of tranquility in Vipassana. If we can appreciate quiet moments where nothing is achieved, savour the absence of drama, enjoy listening as well as speaking, then our spiritual life can flourish even within the busyness of modern culture.

To let us appreciate the absence of achievement, the absence of excitement, we have the delight of tranquility. This delight strengthens our faith in a life of surrender and renunciation.

May our meditation practice here on retreat strengthen the spiritual faculties, so that every aspect of ordinary daily life becomes part of our path to enlightenment.

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