

Intro to Mindfulness Pt 2 (10) Faculty of Discernment

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Hello, everyone. Welcome to the fifth talk on the Five Faculties, five inner powers that we have. In the ancient world, they called these divine qualities inside us aspects of the great god Indra. In colloquial English, we might say that they are superpowers that we have. The *Five Indriyas*, five faculties or capacities are so important.

They all have to do with action. They are not just about understanding and seeing, except that understanding and seeing is a kind of action. It is an engagement. The idea of choicefully and consciously engaging with our lives is not something we often hear in meditation circles. There, it is mostly about relaxing, settling back, being receptive, and not asserting oneself. Those are fantastic ways to engage. They are a kind of engagement too.

When we choose, there is something we do. When we are receptive, we activate something. When we let go, we activate something. With the Five Faculties, we are emphasizing the activation of something that is nourishing, helpful, sustaining, and freeing for us. So we can activate confidence in what we are doing, instead of doing things out of habit, just because we should, or because we are forced to. When you come to meditation, choose to engage in a conscious, kind of deliberate way – “Yes, I am engaging in this. I am going to be here for this.”

But we don't choose to engage in a way that is stressful or that stirs things up – the opposite. We do it in a way that helps us to embody and inhabit what we are doing so something settles and relaxes. This is like the way someone engages in doing yoga, Tai Chi, and Qi Gong. It takes effort. We have to put ourselves into it. But in the movements of these practices, something begins to quiet, settle, and let go. We become more and more embodied and here. But there is a choice to engage, to activate, and to enter into the activation that something harmonizes.

The confidence in practice is what gets us going and choosing, “Yes, big yes, let's do it.” Sometimes it takes heroic effort. It takes courage to show up here and now. Sometimes it takes courage because it goes against the prevailing winds of society. There are more emails to answer, more Netflix movies to watch, more this and that, and things to do and get busy with. Things are in dire straits and we are alarmed by how things are. We have to get anxious and busy.

Be courageous. We don't have to do that. We show up better and care for the world better if we show up calmly, relaxed, openly, prepared, and smart enough to be able to tune into what is happening. Have the courage to do this.

The fifth faculty is mindfulness, which I have been presenting as accompaniment. We choose to accompany, we engage in the practice of accompanying ourselves and the world around us as if we are a good friend – a non-judgmental friend who is there to listen, see, and hold everything there with care. Then we steady ourselves in that and immerse ourselves in the present moment experience. We immerse ourselves in the activity we are doing, like the movement practices of yoga, Tai Chi, or Qi gong, or like the way we forget ourselves and forget time when we are playing a musical instrument or doing a craft. There are things we do that take effort and energy, but when we finish doing them we feel much more relaxed. There is steadiness because we immerse ourselves in what we are doing.

The fifth faculty is usually translated as “wisdom.” Today I am offering it as “discernment,” because wisdom is always present-moment focused. It means to see in such a way that we are wise, which is another meaning for discernment. The idea is to discern useful ways to be present for the world, and useful ways to activate our accompaniment, our mindfulness. It means to be discerning about how we use this wonderful gift we have been given of consciousness, of being consciously aware. It means being discerning about ways we can be aware that reduce stress and don't add to stress. We learn to discern how to not only reduce stress but bring forth a higher quality, a beneficial way of being in the world. We discern a way of being aware that allows for deeper sensitivity, and a deeper flow of goodwill, wisdom, and freedom.

This is, again, not so different from doing a movement like yoga, Tai Chi, and Qi gong. We might be stressed out and hardly able to think very well for ourselves when we start. But at the end of the class, we are much more present and ready to have conversations with people and take care of things. We can be in the world in a nice open, clear way.

We can be discerning about what we are doing as we engage in our accompaniment of life. How do we accompany it so there is less stress? Tensing up, rushing, being angry, having ill will, having desires, and being caught up in fantasies that obscure how well we can see what's there are not skillful. We can see that, we can feel it. Over time, we learn that that's not the way to live.

A free, productive, useful life is one that we engage in and activate by being present with this beautiful capacity of conscious awareness. Inhabit that, have confidence in that, and have the courage to show up this way. Discernment supports us to accompany experience in a way that allows conscious awareness to really flower, to sustain awareness, and to be steady and composed in it.

In the teachings of the Buddha, the distinction between what is helpful and what is not helpful tends to be binary. (Those are my words translating the Buddha, my paraphrasing.) Just that: is what I'm doing now helpful or is it not helpful? And if it's at all unhelpful, don't do it. Have enough discernment to recognize, “Oh, I don't think this is helpful.” Certainly, if you're going to make the situation worse, don't do it. Have enough discernment to know what not to do. Just that is life-changing.

If in addition, you have the discernment and the clarity in this moment about *how* to activate and bring forth conscious awareness in a way that is beneficial, onward leading, helps you become wiser and clearer, and helps you to be present in a nice way for the world and for others – do it, by all means, and do it a lot. Let it fill your life. Let yourself be immersed in a life of conscious awareness with confidence, courage, showing up, giving yourself to it, and the discernment to know that confidence is good. Know what is good to have confidence in: this practice.

Have the courage to know what to do, and the conscious awareness to show up. Have the discernment to know the value of accompaniment – how you accompany your life is where conscious awareness can flower. Have the discernment to know that jumping around and being scattered and preoccupied is not so useful. Being present, steadily and continuously being here is useful.

These are all superpowers. They are amazing capacities we *do* have. Each one of you has them. In Buddhism, they become activated. They get used and flower for us in very beneficial ways. When the *indriya* become strong, in fact, the Buddha called them “the five powers.” Calling them “superpowers” is maybe a little cute, but in fact, he called them “bala,” the Pali word meaning “strengths.” When we have these strengths, not only are they what we activate – the faculties we wake up and use – but they become sustaining qualities that carry us along and support us in everything we do.

I think maybe the 14th of March is the four-year mark of these morning YouTube talks. We started on a Monday four years ago. They have been four wonderful years. I'm grateful to have been doing this and grateful to all of you that we had the chance to meet this way, practice, and teach. I appreciate this opportunity. Thank you.