

Intro to Mindfulness Pt 2 (8) Faculty of Mindfulness

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Hello, and welcome to the third talk on the Five Faculties, which are sometimes called "the five controlling faculties." The word "control," of course, is complicated. But in the good sense of the term, it means that we have some capacity for choice in engaging in this practice so that we're not living at the whims of fate and at the whims of whims. It means that we have some ability to change the direction of our lives and our minds.

One of those capacities is to choose to direct our attention towards awareness in a useful way. Awareness or attention is present in human beings in all their waking hours and maybe even, under some conditions, when they are sleeping. If we don't activate our capacity for choice, then our capacity for attention is used by things that are more deeply subconscious within us. They get hijacked, in a sense. So if we are not taking control or ownership in engaging our attention, our attention might be swept away into our greed or hostility. It might be marshaled or recruited to support those things. Or our attention might get hijacked by fear. Attention is a food for these things.

The more attention is hijacked by fear, anger, ill will, greed, envy, doubts, and such, the more it thrives, and the more those things get stronger. This is to our detriment. So we need to have some choice and agency when we engage in mindfulness, so it doesn't get taken over by other things. This engagement or activation of mindfulness is in the family of things that I've been calling "action." Dharma is a lot about the actions we engage in. Mindfulness practice is an activity that we engage in; it's an action of sorts.

The first faculty, confidence, is the confidence that there are things we can do that are beneficial – we can practice. A core aspect of Dharma practice is confidence in the activity of mindfulness. The next faculty is heroic engagement with that. I think confidence is more a quality of the heart. Heroic effort or courage is much more an activation of the embodiment of who we are when we show up in a full way. Mindfulness, in a sense, has more to do with the mind. We are activating something in the mind so we have a higher capacity for attentiveness to the present moment.

I'll give an example. A friend of yours is quite distressed, and you're walking in the park. You're much more interested in talking about the movie you watched last night (you were fascinated by it and had insights about it) but your friend is really distressed. As you talk about the movie you notice that they're getting quieter, their posture is sinking, and they look even more distressed and at the edge of tears.

At some point, it occurs to you, "Wait a minute, I don't think that talking about this movie is what's called for here right now. My friend is distressed." So then you might decide, "Let me be present for my friend. Let me turn my attention to my friend and accompany them and be with them. Let me check out what's going on here." There's a choice to activate a certain kind of attentiveness. That choice wasn't present when you were carried away by your fascination with the movie. Something is being activated by choice: let's listen to my friend; let's accompany my friend in a deep way.

One good way to accompany people and listen is to pay attention to how we listen. You might notice that you have tension in your body, because maybe you feel like you've blown it, and your friend is going to be angry with you for talking about a movie. You take responsibility for how you are so you can accompany the person well. Maybe you're able to relax, settle, and put aside your self-concern so that you can be really there for your friend.

As you're there more and more, it seems easier to be there. Now it feels like you're attuned to the person, and you're not interested in anything else. You don't have to work to be present for your friend, and you don't have to track yourself so carefully due to being distracted. You're simply there in a nice easy way, and you see that your friend responds accordingly. Their mood lifts a little bit; they seem to appreciate the attention; it seems like you're starting to come a little bit more into harmony. It all started by activating a kind of attention.

Another example would be, let's say that you are really impatient, but you decide to go out for fresh air. But you're super impatient, restlessly impatient. So you find yourself speeding around the neighborhood and nearly bumping into all the people on the sidewalk and the kids on the tricycles because you're hardly noticing anything. After a while, you start noticing, "Wow, something's not quite right here." You notice how impatient you are and how fast you're walking. And so you decide to activate something. You activate your capacity to slow down. You activate the capacity not to give in to expressing the impatience in how you walk, tripping over the kids on the tricycles. So you slow down to pay more attention and to be with yourself more.

You've learned about mindfulness and you've learned it's useful to pay attention to your body. You find out there's a lot of body tension with the impatience. So you relax your shoulders; you relax your eyes; your belly softens. You're choosing and activating the capacity to relax. As you walk more, slowing down, you find that it's useful for you to rest in your body and just be carried by the body, accompanying your body. You find that settles something. Now you're not racing off into your thoughts so much. In fact, now it's easier to pay attention. At some point, attention seems more like something that's receptive than something you're activating. You think, "Oh, this is good – receptive presence." So you decide to be engaged in the choice, to be more receptive to the experience.

Each step along the way, there's something we're activating and engaging, but it's an activation that is not leading to more restlessness, busyness, or agitation. It's an activation that allows something to settle and be quieter and more receptive. The core thing here for mindfulness is the activation of our capacity for present-moment attention. Exactly what that is, is less important than the activation itself of presence, or present-moment attention. It feels as if we're activating a capacity to accompany our experience here and now. I love the expression "accompaniment" for mindfulness because it allows whatever useful attentional faculty we have to be activated.

Yesterday I went walking on the beach, and I felt, "This is really great to feel the wind!" I have a long history with the wind. Part of the reason I was at the beach was to remember things in the past, to honor someone who had passed away. So I activated a capacity to feel the wind for all the times I've been with this person when it was windy at the ocean. I was activating a capacity to feel and be present – to feel the cold on my skin through my clothes. It was really a delight!

We have the capacity to activate the sense door that's needed for any particular time. For people who do mindfulness, the word "activation" might imply we're just getting busy. When we activate with wholeheartedness, that allows all the other activations – all the ways we're scattered, all the ways we're fragmented and being pulled away from ourselves – to settle. There's something deeply healing about activating a full, wholehearted attentiveness, accompanying our experience, being really here in our experience. It allows us to become whole.

When we do that, and when we're honest about what's going on, getting carried away into distractions is where things get off a little bit. That's where there's tension or alienation, or it doesn't quite feel good. But entering into the world, here fully in an activated way, allows some deep relaxation. (Maybe not initially, since in the beginning, we might have to work at it. But eventually, it becomes easier.)

I'll end with another metaphor for cultivating and developing mindfulness. I've read that there are now stationary bicycles you can pedal that can create electricity. Imagine you have such a thing. You require batteries to have lights in your house, but all the batteries are dead. So you get on the bicycle, and you're charging it; you're pedaling around, generating electricity. Very slowly, the battery gets enough charge so you can turn on the lights in the house. But there's no stored electricity in the battery, so you have to keep pedaling and pedaling until there's enough energy stored in the battery so that you can stop pedaling and the lights can stay on. Then you can just relax and enjoy seeing things that were in the dark before.

It is the same way with mindfulness. When we're engaging in it and activating it, in a certain way we are charging the inner battery. At some point, when the battery is full enough, we don't have to work so much at

being aware. The light has been turned on: mindfulness is when the light has been turned on. Sometimes the practice of mindfulness is getting the charge going. But once the charge is there, when we're in the groove of being present, the light turns on. It's wonderful to be activated!

Then we use that light to shine the light on different parts of our life as we accompany it. Today while doing your mindfulness practice throughout the day, you might consider whether it's interesting to understand mindfulness as accompaniment. If you accompany yourself, accompany others, and accompany your experience of life in the present moment as it's unfolding, mindfulness will come along. You cannot help but be attentive when you're accompanying. See how that goes with the faculty of mindfulness. Thank you.