



On the Path to Awakening

The Development of the Five Spiritual Faculties

Christina Garbe

In the meditation instructions of the Buddha we find different sets of qualities to be developed in order to attain spiritual liberation. The basic set is the path that the Buddha describes as the eightfold.

Another group of spiritual qualities he calls faculties (*indriyāni*), which are to be developed. As faculties, the emphasis here is somewhat different. These faculties are

- confidence - *saddhā* ,
- energy - *virīya*,
- mindfulness - *sati*,
- concentration - *samādhi* and
- wisdom – *paññā*.

A path is to be walked step by step. The faculties are the equipment or provisions that are necessary on the path. They work together, support each other, complement each other to progress on the path.

Faculty means that they have the quality of making the path go in the right way. Through them one advances on the path, they give strength.

The Buddha speaks of five faculties, or human potentials, through which an ignorant person can move from ignorance to right understanding. Ignorance is the cause of suffering (*dukkha*)¹, suffering in gross form and suffering or unsatisfactoriness down to the subtlest structures. The whole Buddhist path of liberation from suffering is based on understanding. It is a path of profound understanding of our life in all aspects. Through correct practice we understand not only our individual lives, but existence in general, as well as the characteristics of existence and the causes of how it comes to exist. When these faculties are fully developed, one is mentally capable of doing so.

In a teaching in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (48.11), the Buddha says that when someone has fully accomplished these five faculties, he/she is an arahat. An arahat is a fully awakened person because he/she has overcome all mental defilements so that they can no longer appear in his/her stream of consciousness. This means that these abilities have a very great potential when they are

¹ The Pāli word *dukkha* is often translated as suffering. Suffering is a gross kind of difficulty. However, the word *dukkha* includes any form of shortcoming, difficulty or problem.

well developed. If one wants to develop something, one has to know what one is developing and also for what one develops it.

These five mental faculties, called *indriyāni*, should be strengthened in order to make progress in meditation. Meditation is essential on the path of inner liberation from suffering (*dukkha*). One can practise meditation in everyday life alongside one's daily responsibilities, but one can also practise meditation intensively in a time of retreat from everyday life. This retreat can last a few days, weeks, months, years or a whole lifetime. In Buddha's time, many people were very enthusiastic about meditation. They gave up their worldly life and spent the rest of their lives with meditation as their main occupation. This enthusiasm comes from developing these 5 skills. It becomes increasingly clear where one should set one's priorities in this short human life. These abilities are essential for the spiritual path. They are also prerequisites for living harmoniously in the here and now, regardless of how one spends one's life.

The Buddha called this group of 5 faculties *indriyāni*, derived from the word *indra*, the name for the supreme god in the Vedic religion, the ruler of the devas (light beings or celestial beings). He named them so because they must be strong in order to be able to control the accompanying mind factors so that they are neither in excess nor in deficiency.

The god Indra successfully protected the other gods against the demons and so these powers should also be developed. They should protect the mind from primarily inner demons, but also outer demons.

As a good ruler leads a country to well-being, wealth and progress, as he protects the inhabitants of the country against external attacks, so these faculties, well developed, guide us to spiritual well-being as well as worldly well-being, they lead us to inner wealth, they are the prerequisites for progress on the path, they protect us from inner enemies as well as outer enemies. They should have dominance in our minds over tendencies that are not auspicious.

In a teaching in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (11.12), the Buddha says:

"The faithful one is successful, not the faithless one; the energetic one is successful, not the sluggish one; the mindful one is successful, not the heedless one; the concentrated one is successful, not the unconcentrated one; the wise one is successful, not the unwise one."

Success here is meant in the sense of mental development (*bhāvanā*).

The word faculties means not only that they are the opposite of mental defilements, but that they are the opposite of mental incapacities.

These powers, if they are well developed,

- coordinate our mental activities in a positive direction, which also shows itself in worldly life in
- satisfaction, inner happiness and peace.
- Through their powerful potential, when they work together, they make us capable of action and decision-making.
- They harmonise life with its ups and downs.
- They protect the mind from the many external influences of unwholesome tendencies, be it greed, hatred or delusion. They have the ability to do this.
- They make us independent of unwholesome influences because they give us this inner strength.
- They ultimately culminate in liberating wisdom.
- That means they have a harmonising function for our life in the here and now. But they are also, once well developed, able to go beyond this worldly existence, to lead to the unconditioned, to *Nibbāna*, to the supramundane. That is their real goal. And they are able to achieve it not only through blind faith, but through a profound analysis and understanding of existence and individual life.
- Through this profound understanding they also lead to fulfilment on this path.

These skills all have a specific task along the way, as well as responsibility in their specific area. One can compare them with a team of specialists who work together to produce a comprehensive result. If one member of a team is very dominant, cooperation becomes difficult and a good result is at risk. Similarly, with these five skills, they need to be well balanced with each other. This is an important exercise during meditation practice. We find two pairs among these five abilities, these are confidence and wisdom, and concentration and energy.

These pairs represent two opposite faculties, both of which we should develop, but which need to be well balanced with each other and according to the situation. Thus confidence represents more the point of view of devotion, while wisdom represents the part of understanding and knowledge, both are necessary. Sometimes one has to be used more, sometimes the other.

The pair of energy and concentration, represents the two poles of active effort and striving on the one hand and calm observation and collectedness on the other.

The fifth ability is never in excess. One of its functions is to balance the others in order to avoid extremes. It brings the mind to what is happening in the present moment and as a result the appropriate behaviour.

In the Aṅguttara Nikāya (5. 15) the Buddha describes how to recognise these abilities.

- Confidence is recognised by the 4 factors of stream entry, which are
 1. unshakeable trust in the Buddha
 2. in the Dhamma
 3. in the Sangha
 4. perfect ethical behaviour.
- Energy is recognised by the 4 energetic strivings (*padhāna*), which are:
 1. overcoming arisen unwholesomeness,
 2. Avoiding unarisen unwholesome things,
 3. to develop unarisen wholesomeness,
 4. to increase arisen wholesomeness and bring it to perfection.
- Mindfulness can be recognised by the 4 foundations of mindfulness:
 1. Mindfulness of the body,
 2. mindfulness of the feelings,
 3. mindfulness of the different kinds of consciousness,
 4. mindfulness of the objects of the mind.
- Concentration is recognised by developing the 4 *jhānā* (mental absorptions).
- Wisdom is recognised by the understanding of the 4 noble truths,
 1. the truth of unsatisfactoriness,
 2. the truth of the causes of unsatisfactoriness,
 3. the truth of the end of unsatisfactoriness,
 4. the truth of the path that leads to the end of unsatisfactoriness.

Each of the 5 faculties has its specific task and priority in certain situations, but all must work together and support the predominant one.

The faculties confidence, mindfulness and wisdom only accompany wholesome (*kusala*) consciousness. The faculties of energy and concentration (*ekaggatā/samādhi*) also accompany unwholesome consciousness, but do not have the function of spiritual faculties. In connection with unwholesome consciousness, these two mental factors are disturbed in their profitable development by mental factors such as restlessness and delusion.

Confidence - *saddhā*

Confidence (*saddhā*) is a mental factor that accompanies only wholesome mind moments. In order to strengthen confidence, it is therefore important to know how exactly to increase and develop the wholesome.

When desire and aversion appear in the mind, the corresponding consciousness is not accompanied by confidence. From this mental law one can see that such unwholesome states of

mind inevitably lead to worry, fear and insecurity in life. A mental factor becomes stronger and stronger the more often one dwells in corresponding consciousness. If one dwells frequently in wholesome consciousness, confidence becomes stronger and stronger. If one meditates frequently and correctly, confidence in this path and also in one's own abilities to walk this path becomes stronger and stronger. And confidence in turn gives strength to practise even more intensively. You have to make a beginning at some point, then more and more confidence and strength to intensify your practice will arise.

Confidence refers not only to confidence in the Buddha's teaching, but also to one's own ability to follow this path.

The Buddha emphasised that one should not have blind faith in any teaching, but should always check it out for oneself. This means comparing what you hear with the scriptures and with your own experience. To do this, one must acquire a good knowledge of the scriptures.

In the Aṅguttara Nikāya (2.23 - 26) the Buddha says:

"Two, bhikkhus, make false statements about the accomplished one. Which two?

*The evil one in an evil mind and
the one with blind faith out of ignorance.*

These two make false statements about the accomplished one."

Confidence increases by studying the teachings.

Confidence increases by practising, observing and investigating reality and by comparing one's own experiences with the scriptures. Confidence develops in stages. In the beginning, confidence may be more an emotional experience of confidence, then confidence develops more and more through knowledge and recognition and through one's own experiences in practice.

Self-confidence, that is, confidence in one's own abilities and one's own life, increases with the practice of right mindfulness according to Satipaṭṭhāna. When one sees things more and more as they really are, fears, doubts cannot easily enter the stream of consciousness. One can bear much without falling into unwholesome states of mind. Every moment of mindfulness strengthens self-confidence, one is more independent from the opinion of others, because one learns to look closely oneself.

*"Confidence is the seed,
Restraint at the sense doors is the rain,
yoke and plough is wisdom,
shame is the pole
and the mind is the bond,
mindfulness is the ploughshare and the driving stick."*

Sn 1.4

Energy - viriya - the effort to overcome unwholesome things

Confidence gives strength and also courage. Courage is also an aspect of *viriya*.

If one has no confidence, one is powerless. Doubt makes one powerless and lethargic. So the first spiritual faculty is helpful for developing the second.

The second spiritual faculty is called *viriya*. It can be translated neutrally as mental energy, energy, effort, strength, aspiration, zeal, devotion, absence of lethargy, diligence, steadfastness would be other translations.

Energy is a mental factor that occurs in wholesome and unwholesome consciousness. It is necessary to bring the consciousness and the accompanying factors to the object.

Only mental energy is meant here.

In the Buddha's teachings, confidence is connected with a goal, namely that one can attain liberation. Having a goal also allows a lot of energy to arise. On the other hand, if one searches

aimlessly here and there, it is rather exhausting, the energy does not regenerate so well. Energy is always necessary to develop something, thus also to develop the other abilities. Energy or effort is also always necessary in worldly life if one wants to achieve something, e.g. to pass an exam, to be good at one's job or to perform well in some other field.

The characteristic and function of energy is that it supports the development of other mental factors. It manifests itself by not being slack.

Regarding energy as a spiritual faculty, only the energetic support of wholesome states of consciousness has to be considered, because these lead to liberation from suffering. The direct cause of energy is a spiritual urgency.

Here, energy as a spiritual faculty is about right effort according to the noble eightfold path. The application of energy refers to not allowing unwholesome tendencies to arise or overcoming them if they have already arisen and allowing wholesome tendencies to arise, nurture and increase them.

Mindfulness - *sati* - the pervasive power to understand life

The English word mindfulness is commonly used as a translation for the Pāḷi word *sati*. One could also translate *sati* as pure contemplation, full awareness, conscious alertness or presence of mind. The actual meaning of the Pāḷi word *sati* is remembering.

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya in the Indriya Saṃyutta (SN 48.10.) the Buddha gives an answer to the question:

"And what is the faculty of mindfulness (sati)?"

"Here, Bhikkhus, the noble disciple is mindful, possessing supreme mindfulness and discretion, one who remembers and recollects what was done and said long ago. He dwells contemplating the body in the body ... feelings in feelings ... consciousness in consciousness ... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. This is called the faculty of mindfulness."

Both aspects of mindfulness are described here, that of remembering and that of being mentally present to present phenomena. Recollection could also be interpreted as learning right mindfulness. Therefore, the student remembers what was once said.

Today there are many trainings or even therapies that work with mindfulness. This is not necessarily the same training as we find in Buddhist mind training.

The Buddhist mindfulness practice was developed by Buddha Gotama about 2500 years ago with the aim of finally overcoming suffering. For this, a complete transcendence, a gapless penetration of our existence is necessary. Right mindfulness (*sati*) has this powerful potential.

Mindfulness, *sati*, is a mind factor that is crucial to the Buddhist path of liberation. It is a special faculty of the mind that can penetrate deeply into the object of contemplation. This makes profound understanding possible.

Sati is not to be confused with any kind of attention to one's own person, emotions or external events. *Sati*, Buddhist mindfulness, has to be learned if one wants to be successful in achieving inner liberation.

Mindfulness (*sammā sati*) deals with what we really experience in life. It is not something exotic or ritualistic. It is the contemplation of our own experiences. It is also not a path that leads to mystical experiences, because the Buddhist path of liberation is about understanding what is actually happening in our lives. Mindfulness is an important tool for this. It is not an escape from life. This path brings many worldly benefits, from better health to more skilful handling of emotions, but it also leads beyond the worldly to the ultimate perfect awakening, as the Buddha and many after him attained.

Learning right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) of appearances intensifies mindfulness. Wrong view is always connected with delusion. If the consciousness is connected with delusion, mindfulness cannot develop; it remains a superficial attention.

The right or suitable view has to be learned.

And then it is mindfulness not to react habitually with aversion and desire, but to see things as they are. For example, a smell is just a smell. If one can register it so simply as a sense object, without developing aversion to an unpleasant object and desire for a pleasant object, wholesome awareness conducive to meditation arises. It is the same with sounds, forms, bodily sensations.

Here it becomes clear that although mindfulness means tolerance of appearances, it does not imply a lack of discernment as to what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. Here again the aspect of remembering (the learned *dhamma*) becomes clear. As long as one cannot see realities in their actual appearance and thus learn by seeing directly, one is dependent on teachings to develop right mindfulness.

Concentration - *samādhī* - the clear directing of the mind

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya, in the Indriya Saṃyutta, the chapter on the faculties, the Buddha asks, what the faculty of concentration is. He answers, that one can recognize it as the four *jhāna*. SN 48.10

In SN 48.9 he also asked: *"And what, Bhikkhus, is the faculty of concentration?"*

"Here, Bhikkhus, the noble disciple gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, having made release the object. This is called the faculty of concentration."

The development of the faculty *samādhī* serves as:

- preparation for *vipassanā* meditation,
- the development of concentration, single-pointedness (*ekaggatā*),
- purification of the mind from the five hindrances,
- inner stability, because the mind is not scattered,
- the persistent contemplation of a chosen object,
- the development of stillness, tranquillity of mind. This calmness is an active state of mind, not to be confused with sleepy calmness.
- It serves as the possibility of dwelling long, uninterruptedly in wholesome states of mind, accompanied by happiness and joy or sublime equanimity.
- It serves as the possibility of attaining subtle states of mind, which are necessary to investigate subtle things (*dhammā*) in *vipassanā* meditation.
- It serves as the production of pleasant matter, resulting in physical relaxation. Deep relaxation takes place physically and mentally. This is also a good prerequisite for *vipassanā* meditation, because one can sit well and for a long time without complaints.
- It serves for strengthening the ability to make decisions through a clear choice of objects.
- It serves as the clear focusing of the mind. Through this, one learns to be truly present in other activities as well.
- It serves as the attainment of needlessness through inner joy and happy feeling independent of external objects.
- It serves as the strengthening of endurance and patience, steadfastness, determination, clarity, purposefulness,
- experience, not mixed with emotions, memories of the past and desires for the future,
- to let consciousness, free from emotional entanglements and habitual ways of thinking and reacting, arise on the path of mental purification through concentration. Therefore, the ability to concentrate is an important prerequisite for knowledge from direct vision.

This faculty, like all the other four mental faculties, is about enabling the mind to practise *vipassanā* meditation. Thus, *samatha* meditation is not about the practice of this type of meditation per se, but about preparing for successful *vipassanā* meditation. The special way of developing concentration and single-pointedness of mind is an ideal prerequisite for being able to see the objects of *vipassanā* meditation clearly and grasp them with the mind.

The state of mind, after successful *samatha* meditation, ready for *vipassanā* meditation, is described by the Buddha repeatedly in the discourses as:

parisuddho pure,
pariyodāto clear,

anaṅgaṇo free from blemishes,
vigatūpakkilese free from the finest impurities,
mudubhūto soft,
kammaṇiyo workable,
ṭhito stable,
āneñjappatto unshakable.

The purpose of *vipassanā* meditation is the development of wisdom. The prerequisite for developing wisdom is concentration.

Wisdom - paññā - the crowning of all good qualities on the path.

The prerequisite for developing wisdom is concentration, the mental faculty described before:

*Without wisdom there is no jhāna,
 without jhāna there is no wisdom,
 He who has jhāna and wisdom,
 is close to Nibbāna.*

Dhammapada 372

Wisdom must be developed in stages.

It is the result of the development of the other faculties.

The whole teachings of the Buddha are actually aimed at developing wisdom, because in the development of wisdom lies liberation from suffering. The more wisdom is developed through meditation, the more one's thinking, speaking and acting changes, based on these experiences.

The development of wisdom is known in all religions and philosophies.

Wisdom is a more profound understanding of life, of this world, its origin and development.

In general, wisdom includes a spiritual dimension that goes beyond the everyday development with its problems and difficulties, characterised by desire and aversion.

The Buddhist concept of wisdom is comprehensive and clearly defined. The Buddha taught a clear path of wisdom development. It is the path of authentic *vipassanā* meditation.

In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the chapter on the five mental faculties, *indriya-saṃyutta* (SN.48.10), the Buddha asks:

"And what is the faculty of wisdom?" He replies:

"Here, ..., the noble disciple is wise. He has wisdom which is directed towards arising and passing away and which is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete overcoming of suffering. He understands as it really is: 'This is suffering.' He understands as it really is: 'This is the cause of suffering.' He understands how it really is: 'This is the end of suffering.' He understands as it really is: 'This is the path that leads to the end of suffering.' This is called the faculty of wisdom."

These four noble truths are the heart of the whole teachings of the Buddha. They contain, in a nutshell, the entire path of liberation from suffering.

Only through developing wisdom can real, lasting purification of the mind take place. This purification refers to overcoming the three unwholesome roots which are craving, aversion and delusion. These three unwholesome roots are gradually eliminated from the stream of consciousness with the realisation of Nibbāna.

If these unwholesome roots can no longer appear in the stream of consciousness through the development of wisdom, action towards beings also expresses itself in wise behaviour as compassion, loving kindness and equanimity.

In order to finally overcome the unwholesome roots, the development of loving kindness, compassion and equanimity as qualities that determine behaviour are also part of the development of wisdom.

On the one hand, the capacity for wisdom is strengthened through wise attention to the objects of consciousness.

But the capacity for wisdom is also developed through correct *samatha* meditation with a suitable object. This condition is very important, because a troubled mind seeking pleasure here and there is not able to develop a wise way of looking at things. The wisdom faculty, developed through concentration, can then be applied to develop wise insight through the analytical method as described as the practice of mindfulness (*sati*) and clear understanding (*sampajañña*) by the Buddha.

Right mindfulness and clear understanding are the means for wisdom to mature more and more.

Wisdom in the Buddhist sense is attained through thorough, profound investigation and enquiry into reality, which is an analytical method.

This refers to the recognition of ultimate realities, as well as the recognition of the specific characteristics inherent in these phenomena. Specific characteristics are for example: the earth element is always solid. Fire is always hot. Consciousness always recognises an object. Aversion always rejects an object. Desire always longs for an object. Specific characteristics are so called because they are the characteristic of only one phenomenon.

In addition to specific characteristics, there are so-called universal characteristics of phenomena. Universal means that these characteristics are inherent to all conditionally arisen phenomena. These universal characteristics are impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and selflessness (*anatta*). If one can see the specific characteristics clearly, the vision for the universal characteristics opens up. With the seeing of the universal characteristics, profound wisdom is developed.

The culmination of the development of the wisdom faculty lies in the realisation of the cessation of suffering, the realisation of Nibbāna.

"For this, Bhikkhu, is the supreme noble wisdom, namely, the knowledge of the destruction of all suffering."