

The Five Faculties Confirmed

July 21, 2020

For the past couple of nights, we've been going over the sets of the Wings to Awakening. We've done three sets so far: the four establishing of mindfulness, the four right exertions, the four bases for power. Those are sets that deal with effort, mindfulness, and concentration. The next two sets, which are basically identical—the five faculties and the five strengths—contain effort, mindfulness, and concentration, and they add two more: conviction and discernment. These two faculties provide the framework for our practice.

It's because of conviction that we're practicing, and it's for the sake of discernment that we're practicing concentration. The two qualities help each other along. In a general sense, conviction is focused on the fact that there is a path to awakening. It's like being convinced that there's a way to get out of the forest when you're lost in the forest. When you're convinced that there's a way out, you're more likely to find it.

Discernment is what's going to find the way out. So the discernment comes from the fact that you're convinced. If you don't have that conviction, discernment doesn't have the energy it needs to figure out what that way is, or to even see that it's worthwhile to try.

In a more specific sense, conviction focuses on our conviction that the Buddha was awakened. He really did, through his own efforts, find an end to suffering, and his awakening included three knowledges: knowledge of past lives, knowledge of how beings are reborn through their karma, and then finally the liberation of the mind through the four noble truths.

Based on that, we see that the Dhamma is well taught. Those who have followed the Dhamma have found awakening as well. That's part of our conviction too, which gives us the energy to say, "Well, if they can do it, so can we."

The fourth aspect of conviction is virtues pleasing to the noble ones: pleasing both in the sense that they are fully followed, and in the sense that you don't exalt yourself and disparage others over the fact that you follow the precepts and they don't. This virtue, as the Buddha says in other places, is what underlies our practice of the right exertions, the practice of right mindfulness, the practice of concentration, and the bases for power. But it also gives focus to our discernment.

To begin with, we focus on our actions because, as the Buddha said, our actions will make

all the difference on the path. And where do our actions come from? They come from the mind. So we realize we've got to train the mind. And training the mind will require seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

Now, those four noble truths are not intuitive. As the Buddha says, we suffer because of our clinging. But our knee-jerk reaction usually is that we're suffering because of things other people have done, or because of situations outside. Or we may say that we're suffering because we're bad people in ourselves, our nature is inherently bad, so we deserve to suffer. Those ideas the Buddha says to put aside.

We suffer because of an activity we do, and it's an activity that we can learn how not to do, regardless of how long we've been doing it. We're willing to give the four noble truths a serious try because the Buddha says that they were the truths that got him out of suffering.

This conviction is what impels us to want to look at where we clinging, where we are craving. What qualities of mind can we develop so that we can get past that craving, and put an end to the clinging? In this way, conviction is what motivates us to practice and to develop the discernment in terms of the four noble truths. Then our discernment turns around and verifies our conviction. It's when, in applying the duties of the four noble truths, that we finally have an experience of the deathless, that we realize that our conviction was well founded: The Buddha really did know what he was talking about. Anyone who has followed the path will have attained the same results.

This confirms our conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

But it does it in an interesting way. There's a sutta where the Buddha says that at stream-entry you've seen the five faculties in terms of their origination, their passing away, their allure, their drawbacks, and the escape from them. Now, that fivefold analysis is something the Buddha usually reserves for dealing with unskillful things, or objects of attachment, objects of clinging, but here he's applying it to the path. It's interesting that the Commentary, which likes to explain everything down to the last little word in the suttas, doesn't explain *anything* in that particular sutta at all.

What the sutta is getting at is that even the path is fabricated, and you have to go beyond it. To do that, you apply that fivefold analysis.

As the Buddha says elsewhere, the five faculties originate in heedfulness. You realize that it is possible for your actions to make a difference between whether you're happy or not happy. And you realize that the heedful path is to assume that, yes, your actions do make a difference,

because otherwise your actions just get thrown away. If you have choices and you don't see them as important, you're going to get careless. You realize that it is in your best interest to adopt the principle of conviction and then, based on the conviction, the heedful path is to work on developing skillful qualities of the mind and abandoning unskillful ones, to develop mindfulness, to develop concentration, to develop discernment. Heedfulness underlies all of these things. It provides the connections between the different faculties.

So that's the origination of the five faculties. Their passing away comes when heedfulness lapses. Their allure, of course, is the happiness that comes from them, particularly the happiness coming from concentration. But there's also a happiness that comes from being convince that you are a noble human being, you can become a noble human being. As you see that nobility developing through your right efforts, you see that you're developing a fund of knowledge that you can apply to develop skillful qualities. You can remember those things that you've learned from the past, and your discernment allows you to let go of things that have been weighing down the mind. This is all going to be part of the allure of the faculties as you're practicing them.

Of course, the drawbacks of the faculties are that they're fabricated. They have to be maintained. So when you see their limitations, that's when you're ready to go beyond them—but you're not going to see their limitations until you've mastered them and have seen how far they can take you.

Seeing that their limitations outweigh their allure, you gain dispassion for them. When you escape from conviction, from persistence, from mindfulness, from concentration, from the discernment through that dispassion, that's when you realize these qualities really do lead to the deathless. You have no more need for conviction, but your conviction has been confirmed.

So this is why we practice these faculties. They are means, and the Buddha's very clear about the fact that they're means. They show their true value partly as you practice, because they do have that allure as you're practicing. But they show their ultimate value when you go even beyond the allure. You go to the escape.

The Buddha illustrates this with the image of an elephant hunter looking for a bull elephant in the forest. He sees large elephant footprints, but he doesn't come to the immediate conclusion that they must be the footprints of a bull elephant because there are dwarf females with large feet. But the prints look promising, and the heedful path is to follow what looks promising. He follows them and he sees scratch marks up in the trees. Again, he doesn't jump

to the conclusion that these must be the scratch marks left by a big bull elephant because there are tall females with tusks. Still, they look promising, and the heedful approach when something looks promising is to follow it through. The hunter finally gets to the clearing where the big bull elephant is standing, and that's when he knows: "This is the elephant I've been looking for."

Now, in that analogy, the five faculties are the footprints, and the heedful thing to do is to follow them. They will be confirmed when you gain the escape from them—seeing the elephant in the clearing corresponds to stream-entry—because that's when the five faculties show how truly helpful they are. There was one point where the Buddha asked Sariputta, who at that point had become an arahant, "Do you believe that the five faculties lead to the deathless?" And Sariputta said, "No." He said, "I don't believe. I know." That knowledge is what we want to get to, but in the meantime the heedful path is to believe in these faculties and to develop them as best we can.