

Working with Habitual Patterns and Noticing the Five Faculties

For this week, I'd like to include the theme noticing and being mindful of habitual patterns. We all have habitual patterns, and they run our lives more often than we would like to admit. Sometimes it feels like our lives are on auto-pilot, with our habits running the show, sometimes leaving us with suffering in their wake. Often these patterns are based on old and deep conditioning. We can illuminate these tendencies with mindfulness, understand them, and see whether they serve us, or lead us into struggle and difficulty. Taking an interest in our habitual patterns can lead to a deeper understanding of the undercurrents that motivate us, and mindfulness of these patterns begins to give us a choice about whether we engage in them.

As an additional project for this week, choose one habitual pattern that you are interested in understanding. You can choose any kind of habitual pattern that you have noticed yourself engaging in. It might manifest as a behavior, as an emotion, as a thought pattern, or even a speech pattern. It can be a pattern that you have noticed throughout your life, or it could be a new pattern that you see yourself engaging in because of specific circumstances currently in your life.

For example, you might have a habit of procrastination that formed during your teenage years, or you might find that in the past few weeks, you get angry every time a particular person is around. While most people would agree that the first example as a habit, some might think that the second example seems more like a response to a specific situation than a habit. So, let's key on the word "pattern" more than "habit". Choose a pattern that is currently unfolding in your life that you would like to understand more about.

The main practice around patterns is to notice them! Choose one pattern as a project, and resolve to "wake up" when you are engaging in that pattern. It is most helpful if the investigation around the pattern has a very light touch: simply notice what is most obvious about your experience. There is no need to dig, or try to figure out *why* the pattern is happening. Just notice *what* is happening. You might notice a physical response such as tension or release, or you might notice an emotion, thoughts or images. You might also take an interest in what happens to the pattern while you are observing it.

A key quality to bring to this exploration is *interest*. We are exploring the pattern to understand it, not necessarily to try to get rid of it. I have found some of the biggest benefits and insights while observing habitual patterns, in particular around those patterns that I am *really interested* in understanding. This blending of interest with observation is powerful, and can help us to appreciate the process of observation itself.

As we bring mindful attention to our patterns, some other beautiful qualities begin to manifest, simply through the process of observing our experience. For example, as you are paying attention to the pattern, you might notice that the interest in observing it leads to a feeling of *confidence* in the practice, and an increased level of *energy* for engaging with the pattern.

These qualities can go unnoticed because we often tend to be more engaged with the pattern itself (and the suffering that it brings) than we are with the qualities that result from awareness of the pattern. As we recognize these qualities more frequently, that recognition helps us to be less caught in the pattern, and more interested in the process of observing it! This leads to less identification and less suffering around the pattern.

There are many beautiful qualities of mind that result from mindful attention. The list I would like to offer for this week includes the five faculties:

- Confidence (sometimes called Faith; *saddha* in Pali): confidence in the teachings, the practice, in ourselves. Can also manifest as a feeling of trust in the unfolding of your experience.
- Energy (*viriya*): energy applied to the practice, to observing and understanding our experience in terms of the teachings. Energy is not the same thing as effort, interest or investigation, but these qualities lead to increased energy, so it is helpful to also recognize effort, interest and investigation.
- Mindfulness (*sati*): mindful awareness of our experience. Knowing what is happening while it is happening.
- Concentration (*samadhi*): stability of mind. Other synonyms: composure, collectedness, settledness. This does not need to be stability on a single object (such as the breath), but can manifest as a *stability of awareness* on changing experience.
- Wisdom (*panna*): seeing our experience in terms of the four noble truths, and whether our actions are skillful (leading us away from suffering) or unskillful (leading us towards suffering).

For example, you might start to feel more *confident* in your ability to wake up for something that you were previously unaware of. Or the simple fact of declaring your intention to be aware might make you feel more alert (*energy*) and ready to notice (*mindfulness*) what comes up. You might be *mindful* of more subtle aspects of your experience, or be able to pay attention for longer periods of time (*concentration*). You might begin to see the intention toward an action, or "choice points", offering you previously unseen options for acting skillfully (*wisdom*) in difficult situations.

This practice can be quite light. Simply being informed that these qualities arise as we pay attention to our experience can help us to notice them! *So, you don't need to make a big project out of trying to find these qualities as you are paying attention to your pattern.* For now, see if you can simply take an interest other qualities that might appear when you are interested in understanding your experience and observing it with mindfulness. Don't worry if they are not obvious to you. Our habits and patterns tend to make us to overlook these qualities, and they can be subtle, so it can take time for them to become clear.

Using mindfulness to explore and understand patterns can be one of the most powerful fruits of daily life practice. When we are in sitting meditation, these patterns might not come up very frequently, but daily life offers endless opportunities to observe and learn from our patterns.