



# The Five Powers

## THE HEART OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

As children growing up in central Vietnam, my brothers, sisters, and I used to run out to the yard every time it rained. It was our way of taking a shower. We were so happy! Sometime later, our mother would call us and serve us a bowl of rice with pickled bean sprouts or salty fish. We'd take our bowls and sit in the doorway, eating and continuing to watch the falling rain. We were free of all worries and anxieties, not thinking about the past, the future, or anything at all. We just enjoyed ourselves, our food, and each other. On New Year's Day, Mother served us special cakes, and we went outside and ate the cakes while playing with the cat and the dog. Sometimes our New Year's clothes were so starched that they squeaked as we walked. We thought we were in paradise.

Growing up, we began to worry about homework, the right clothes, a good job, and supporting our family, not to mention war, social injustice, and so many other difficulties. We thought our paradise was lost, but it was not. We only had to remember how to water the seeds of paradise in ourselves, and we were able to produce true happiness again. Even today, you and I can return to our own paradise every time we breathe in and out mindfully. Our true home was not only in the past. It is present now. Mindfulness is the energy we can produce in our daily lives to bring our paradise back.

The Five Faculties, or Bases (*indriyani*), are the power plants that can help us generate this energy in ourselves. The Five Powers (*balani*) are that energy in action. The Five Faculties and Powers are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and insight. When practiced as bases, they are like factories that produce electricity. When practiced as powers, they have the capacity to bring about all the elements of the Eightfold Path, just as electricity manifests as light or heat.

**The first of the five is faith (*shraddha*).** When we have faith, a great energy in us is unleashed. If our faith is in something unreliable or false, not informed by insight, sooner or later it will lead us to a state of doubt and suspicion. But when our faith is made of insight and understanding, we will touch the things that are good, beautiful, and reliable. Faith is the confidence we receive when we put into practice a teaching that helps us overcome difficulties and obtain some transformation. It is like the confidence a farmer has in his way of growing crops. It is not blind. It is not some belief in a set of ideas or dogmas.

**The second power is diligence (*virya*),** the energy that brings joy into our practice. Faith gives birth to diligence, and this diligence continues to strengthen our faith. Animated with diligent energy, we become truly alive. Our eyes shine, and our steps are solid.

**The third power is mindfulness (*smriti*).** To look deeply, to have deep insight, we use the energy of Right Mindfulness. Meditation is a power plant for mindfulness. When we sit, eat a meal, or wash the dishes, we can learn to be mindful. Mindfulness allows us to look deeply and see what is going on. Mindfulness is the plow, the hoe, and the irrigation source that waters insight. We are the gardener — plowing, sowing, and watering our beneficial seeds.

**The fourth power is concentration (*samadhi*).** To look deeply and see clearly, we need concentration. When we eat, wash dishes, walk, stand, sit, lie down, breathe, or work in mindfulness, we develop concentration. Mindfulness leads to concentration, and concentration leads to insight and to faith. With these four qualities, our life is filled with joy and the energy of being alive, which is the second power.

**The fifth power is insight, or wisdom** (*prajña*), the ability to look deeply and see clearly, and also the understanding that results from this practice. When we can see clearly, we abandon what is false, and our faith becomes Right Faith.- When all five power plants are working, producing electricity, they are no longer just faculties. They become the Five Powers. There is a difference between producing something and having the power that it has generated. If there is not enough energy in our body and mind, our five power plants need repair. When our power plants function well, we are able to produce the energy we need for our practice and for our happiness.

Our store consciousness contains the seeds of all of these energies. When joy or anger is not present in our mind consciousness, we may say, "I don't have that," but we do. It's below, in our store consciousness. Under the right conditions, that seed will manifest. We may say, "I'm not angry. I don't have anger in me," but anger is still there in our unconscious mind. Everyone has a seed of anger lying dormant, below, in our store consciousness. When we practice, our effort is to water positive seeds and let the negative seeds remain dormant. We don't say, "Until I've gotten rid of all my bad seeds, I can't practice." If you get rid of all your unwholesome seeds, you won't have anything to practice. We need to practice now with all the unwholesome seeds in us. If we don't, the negative seeds will grow and cause a great deal of suffering.

Practicing the Five Powers is a matter of cultivating the earth of our store consciousness and sowing and watering good seeds. Then, when they arise into our mind consciousness and become flowers and fruits, they will scatter more good seeds throughout our store consciousness. If you want wholesome seeds to be in your mind consciousness, you need the condition of continuity. "Fruits of the same nature" will resow wholesome seeds in you.-

*The Lotus Sutra* says, "All sentient beings have the Buddha nature (*Buddhata*)." With the right conditions, the seed of Buddha nature in us will grow. We could also call that seed the seed of Right Mindfulness or the seed of insight, wisdom, or right faith. These are, in fact, one seed. To practice means to help that wonderful seed manifest. When we are mindful, concentration is already there. When we are concentrated, there is insight and wisdom. When we have faith, there is energy. Mindfulness is the seed of Buddha in us. Concentration is, therefore, already present in this seed of mindfulness in us.

The appellation "Buddha" comes from the root of the verb *budh* — which means to wake up, to understand, to know what is happening in a very deep way. In knowing, understanding, and waking up to reality, there is mindfulness, because mindfulness means seeing and knowing what is happening. Whether our seeing is deep or superficial depends on our degree of awakening. In each of us, the seed of Buddha, the capacity to wake up and understand, is called Buddha nature. It is the seed of mindfulness, the awareness of what is happening in the present moment. If I say, "A lotus for you, a Buddha to be," it means, "I see clearly the Buddha nature in you." It may be difficult for you to accept that the seed of Buddha is in you, but we all have the capacity for faith, awakening, understanding, and awareness, and that is what is meant by Buddha nature. There is no one who does not have the capacity to be a Buddha.

But the treasure we are looking for remains hidden to us. Stop being like the man in the Lotus Sutra, who looked all over the world for the gem that was already in his pocket. Come back and receive your true inheritance. Don't look outside yourself for happiness. Let go of the idea that you don't have it. It is available within you.

The Bodhisattva *Never Despising* could not dislike anyone, because he knew that each of us has the capacity to become a Buddha. He would bow to every child and adult and say, "I do not dare to underestimate you. You are a future Buddha." Some people felt so joyful upon hearing this that faith arose in them. But others, thinking that he was making fun of them, shouted and hurled stones at him. He continued this practice for his whole life, reminding others they had the capacity to wake up. Why wander all over the world looking for something you already have? You are already the richest person on Earth.

How can we help someone who feels she cannot love herself? How can we help her be in touch with the seed of love already in her, so it can manifest as a flower and she can smile? As a good friend, we have to learn to look deeply into our own consciousness and into the

consciousness of others. We can help our friend cultivate that seed and realize her capacity to love.

There is a **sixth power called "capacity" or "inclusiveness"** (kshanti). The capacity to be happy is very precious. Someone who is able to be happy even when confronted with difficulties, has the capacity to offer light and a sense of joy to herself and to those around her. When we are near someone like this, we feel happy, also. Even when she enters hell, she will lighten hell with the sound of her laughter.

There is a bodhisattva named Kshitigarbha whose practice is to go into the places of deepest suffering and bring light and laughter to others. If your Sangha has one person like that, someone who can smile, be happy, and have faith in all circumstances, it is a good Sangha.

Ask yourself, "Am I like that?" At first glance, you might think not. You might have an inferiority complex, which is the second kind of pride.<sup>1</sup> Please follow the advice of Never Despising Bodhisattva and look deeply into your store consciousness to accept that the seed of happiness, the capacity to love and to be happy, is there. Practice joy. You may think that washing dishes is menial work, but when you roll up your sleeves, turn on the water, and pour in the soap, you can be very happy. Washing the dishes mindfully, you see how wonderful life is. Every moment is an opportunity to water the seeds of happiness in yourself. If you develop the capacity to be happy in any surroundings, you will be able to share your happiness with others.

Otherwise you might think, This is an unhappy situation. I must go somewhere else. And you'll go from place to place wandering like the prodigal son. When you realize your own capacity to be happy anywhere, you can put down roots in the present moment. You can take whatever the conditions of the present moment are and make them the foundation of your life and your happiness. When the sun is shining, you are happy. When it is raining, you are also happy. You don't need to go anywhere else. You don't need to travel into the future or return to the past. Everything in the present moment belongs to your true home. All the conditions for happiness are here. You only have to touch the seeds of happiness that are already in you.

When you enter a well-tended garden and see a fresh, beautiful rose, you want to pick it. But to do so, you have to touch some thorns. The rose is there, but the brambles are also there. You have to find a way to understand the thorns so you can pick the rose. Our practice is the same. Don't say that because there are thorns you cannot be happy. Don't say that because there is still anger or sadness in your heart, you cannot enjoy anything at all. You have to know how to deal with your anger and sadness so you don't lose the flowers of joy.

When our internal formations (*samyojana*) and suffering are dormant in our store consciousness, it is a good time to practice watering the positive seeds. When feelings of pain come into our conscious mind, we have to breathe mindfully and practice walking meditation in order to deal with those feelings. Don't lose the opportunity to water the seeds of happiness, so that more seeds of happiness will enter your store consciousness.

When the Buddha was about to pass away, his attendant Ananda cried and cried. The Buddha comforted him, saying, "Buddhas in the past had good attendants, but none were as good as you, Ananda." He was watering the seeds of happiness in Ananda, because Ananda had looked after Buddha with all his heart. He said, "Ananda, have you seen the wonderful fields of golden rice stretching out to the horizon? They are very beautiful." Ananda replied, "Yes, Lord, they are very beautiful." The Buddha was always reminding Ananda to notice the things that are beautiful. Ananda was anxious about taking care of the Buddha well, and he wasn't able to pick the rose of his daily life. When you see a cloud in the sky, ask your friend, "Do you see that cloud? Isn't it splendid?" How can we live so that the seeds of happiness in us are watered every day? That is the cultivation of joy, the practice of love. We can practice these things easily when we have the energy of mindfulness. But without mindfulness, how can we see the beautiful rice fields? How can we feel the delightful rain? Breathing in, I know the rain is falling. Breathing out, I smile to the rain. Breathing in, I know that rain is a

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<sup>1</sup> The Three Kinds of Pride are : 1) Thinking I am better than the others ; 2) I am worse than the other(s) ; 3) and thinking I am just as good as the other(s)

necessary part of life. Breathing out, I smile again. Mindfulness helps us regain the paradise we thought we had lost.

We want to return to our true home, but we are in the habit of running away. We want to sit on a lotus flower, but instead we sit on burning charcoal, and we want to jump off. If we sit firmly in the present moment, it is as though we are sitting on a lotus. The Buddha is always represented as sitting peacefully on a lotus flower, because he was always at home. He didn't need to run anymore. To enjoy sitting in the present moment is called "just sitting" or "non-action." Venerable Thich Quang Due was able to sit peacefully even while fire was blazing all around him. He was burning, but he was still sitting on a lotus. That is the ultimate capacity to sit peacefully in any circumstance, knowing that nothing is lost.

The capacity to feel at peace anywhere is a positive seed. The energy to run away is not. If we practice mindfulness, whenever the energy of wanting to run away arises, we can smile at it and say, "Hello, my old friend, I recognize you." The moment we recognize any habit energy, it loses a little of its power. Every time Mara appeared, the Buddha said, "I know you, my old friend," and Mara fled.

In the *Samiddhi Sutra*, we are taught to practice so that our happiness is present here and now. It isn't necessary to run away or abandon our present home and look for an illusory home, a so-called paradise that is really just a shadow of happiness. When we produce faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and insight in our power plants, we realize that our true home is already filled with light and power.