

The world in our hand¹

The Dharma, or the way to know true reality, is in our own hands, or at least, our 5 fingers. They represent the early Buddhist teachings of **the 5 spiritual faculties**, that is, faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.² These faculties are especially helpful in harmonizing our mental development and meditation progress to effect our awakening.

On a simpler level, they are vital guidelines to a balanced life that is meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling. Let us see how these faculties harmonize our spiritual life.³

1. **Our thumb** is nearest to us, our “first finger,” so to speak. It is the most human of our fingers. Technically, it is called a “thumb,” its unique name, while the other 4 (totalling 8) are simply “fingers.” Only the thumb is “opposable” (its tip or “pulp” can touch) the other 4 fingers (even all 4) of the same hand. Only humans have such versatile thumbs.⁴ Of course, our thumb cannot work alone, but with the help of the other fingers.

The thumb, as the finger closest to us, should remind us of those closest to us, our loved ones and dear friends. They are the ones we should first direct our lovingkindness to, as they are the easiest to feel kindly towards. Hence, sending our lovingkindness to them also fills us with lovingkindness, so that we are radiant with love that inspires trust and faith.

Since the thumb is our first and unique digit, it is like **faith**, the first of the 5 spiritual faculties. Faith, in Buddhism, is unique because it is not based on belief, but on knowing and understanding: to know is to believe (not the other way around).⁵

Wholesome faith is closely connected with the other faculties, that is, effort, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. True faith energizes us to exert effort in our Dharma practice. It keeps us mindful of the qualities of the 3 jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the noble sangha), so that we can emulate them. Such a faith helps us in our meditation to gain concentration, with which we gain liberating wisdom. In this sense, faith is found in the 4 qualities of a streamwinner.⁶

2. The next finger is **the pointing or index finger**. It is that part of our body that visibly guides and teaches us and others. Notice how we point our finger at those words we want to learn or remember.

Hence, the index finger should remind us of our teachers, Dharma workers and those from whom we have learned something useful, or who have showed us the right way when we were seeking or were lost. So, we direct our lovingkindness to them next, as they are precious to us, and we owe our gratitude to them.

Learning entails **effort**, which is the second of the 5 spiritual faculties. There are 4 kinds of efforts. The first is the easiest: if we have not done anything bad, keep it that way (that’s the effort of non-effort!). The second effort is to stop doing something bad and keep it that way.

¹ This reflection is dedicated to OH Teik Bin of Teluk Intan (previously Telok Anson), Malaysia, an old friend, who is a motivated Buddhist who has been motivating others almost all his life.

² See **Pañc’indriya**, [SD 10.4](#); [SD 3.6 \(3\)](#).

³ This teaching is based on **(Pañcaka) Daṭṭhabba Sutta** (A 5.15) = S 48.8 @ [SD 10.4\(1.1.3\)](#).

⁴ Lynette A Jones & Susan J Lederman, “Evolutionary Development and Anatomy of the Hand,” *Human Hand Function*, Oxford, 2006:12.

⁵ See [SD 10.4 \(2.2.3\)](#).

⁶ This faith forms 3 of the 4 qualities of a streamwinner: unshakable faith (1) in the Buddha, (2) in the Dharma, and (3) in the sangha; and (4) moral virtue dear to the saints. See **Entering the stream**, [SD 3.3\(4.2\)](#).

The third effort is to start doing something good, such as learning to meditate. And the fourth effort is to keep on doing something good.⁷

3. The third and **middle finger** is the longest one. It reminds us of our good leaders, especially those who have worked hard to give us a place and chance to meet other Dharma-hearted Buddhists and wise teachers. This finger also reminds us of our community elders and nation's leaders. We should direct our lovingkindness to them wishing them all the peace and wisdom they need to run the country so that we can practise the Dharma freely.

The middle finger has two other fingers on each side. It is **mindfulness**, the third spiritual faculty, the middle one, that harmonizes all the other 4 spiritual faculties. Hence, it is the moderator of our life, keeping us to the middle way.

The middle of the "middle way" or Dharma living is that of mental cultivation and meditation. Mindfulness comprises the 4 focuses of mindfulness,⁸ that is, the body, the mind, feelings and reality. Mindfulness begins with our own *body*, such as the breath. Being mindful of our breath, we calm ourselves. Then, we *feel* how peaceful we are, and rise above our feelings. Then, we notice our *thoughts* (the mind working on the senses), and we gently set free our thoughts. Then, we are ready to see into the truth of our mind's clarity, and taste the beauty of a wise heart.

4. The fourth finger is our **ring finger**. This reminds us of our very special loved one, and how we are connected with those we love. Imagine how we love ourself, our partner or our soul-mate. This same love should be unconditionally extended to them, as if they are each our own child. This is where we "break the barriers" and show unconditional lovingkindness to all beings.

A surprising fact is that the ring finger is our weakest finger, as any piano teacher will tell us. It should remind us of those who are the weakest, or those in trouble or pain. This finger also reminds us of the compassion we should show to those who are less privileged, those in pain or suffering loss, the lonely, the ill, and so on.

But things change: those in pain heal; the lonely are comforted; the ill recover; and all seems well. Then, it's a time for rejoicing in them. This is a time to show gladness in the success and goodness of others.

Yet, the ups and downs of life go on, no matter what we do. The sun never sets; the sun never rises; we only think it does so. Despite our best efforts, there will still be suffering around us. Despite our best efforts, there will still be those who need help, and remain unhelped, even unknown that they need help.

But we have done our very best. We know that the sun is always there; at least for as long as we live. Just like the sun, we must look on at the world, shine on, keep bringing light and warmth into the lives of others with equanimity. This finger may be the weakest, but it is telling us a lot: we need to be strong and at peace with ourself.

Even the Buddha does not save the world, because we each have a world of our own to learn with, to learn from, and to rise above it.

5. And lastly comes our **little finger** or pinkie, the smallest finger of them all. Our pinkie represents us. We should not forget to send lovingkindness to ourself, too. We must keep a loving peace within and without, despite everything. We must keep our mind focused in the stillness that awaits us when day is done, when all is over.

⁷ See **(Cātu) Padhāna Sutta** (A 4.14), [SD 10.2](#).

⁸ See **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), [SD 13.3](#).

The little finger may be the smallest, but it is a great reminder to us that we, too, are tiny compared to the whole universe: we are very tiny, and yet very significant. We are aware of ourself, but as we look deeper we see only the rise and fall of our own being. There is no permanent self or abiding essence.

This is the beauty of our life: that we can live the moment. This is the truth of the moment: that our life is about everything around us, how we rise, how we fall, like little ripples that move and melt into the shore. The ripples keep coming until they are no more. It has gone nowhere, and yet it is not there. Our journey has ended finally. Remember all this on the fingers of our hand.

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