



## The Five Defenders of freedom

### The twin Islands of ‘Potential’ and ‘Strength’

*“There are these five faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, collectedness, wisdom.” ~ Gotama (the Buddha)*

*“The five faculties are interdependent: confidence inspires energy; energy supports mindfulness; mindfulness steadies concentration; concentration allows wisdom to arise; wisdom in turn strengthens confidence.” ~ Bikkhu Bodhi*

### What Gotama taught about the Five Defenders of freedom

Having explored that craving amplifies suffering, and cultivated the ‘Appropriate Response’, the heart-quality of ‘Befriending’, we now turn to developing the specific inner strengths required for the second stage of our journey – the challenging work of ‘A’ to Abandon.

In his early talks, Gotama repeatedly named five trainable qualities as the heart of practice:

- ★ Confidence (Faith) (*saddhā*)
- ★ Courageous Effort (*virīya*)
- ★ Therapeutic Mindfulness (*satī*)
- ★ A Gathered Mind (Focus) (*samādhī*)
- ★ Discernment (*paññā*)

These are not five separate items on a checklist but a dynamic, interconnected system of inner resources. They are presented in two ways. As ‘*Faculties*’, they are potentials that can be weak or strong, balanced or out of balance. As ‘*Powers*’, these same Five Defenders have become steady and unshakeable, resilient under pressure and reliable in daily life.

For our purposes, we will explore the ‘faculties and powers’ together, calling them the ‘Five Defenders’, because when cultivated, they provide the strength

and inner authority needed to avoid being swept away by habitual reactions. They defend the raft and make the work of abandoning harmful cravings possible.

### **Healing the wounds: the surgeon's tools**

To understand the vital role of these 'Defenders', we can turn to a powerful simile used by Gotama – that of a person shot with a poisoned arrow. A surgeon is called, who must use a sharp knife to open the wound and a probe to locate and remove the arrow, before extracting the poison completely.

The wound is the way the world impacts the senses; the poison is ignorance; the arrow is craving. The probe, he said, is '*Healing Mindfulness*', and the knife is '*Discernment*' (wisdom). The other three 'Defenders' provide the necessary support for this delicate operation: the *stability* to hold steady (a '*Gathered Mind*'), the *courage* to endure the procedure ('*Courageous Effort*'), and the *trust* that healing is possible ('*Confidence*').

---

### **Self-reflections**

- ★ Which defender is observed to be most available at present? Which quality appears to need more care and attention?
- ★ What simple condition (sleep, food, connection, movement) would strengthen the weaker quality?
- ★ Reflecting on a recent difficult episode, which defender, if any, was observed to arise first?
- ★ What conditions or recollections reliably allow confidence to re-emerge when the mind is fogged by doubt?
- ★ How is courageous effort experienced when it arises from kindness rather than pressure? What single next step would honour that?
- ★ When wisdom asks 'What leads away from harm?', what answer usually appears? What value does that serve?

---

## Journaling prompts

- ★ **Defence assessment:** For each of the Five Defenders, write a sentence about where its presence is currently seen in your life, and one condition that strengthens it.
- ★ **Investigating a trigger:** Map the sequence of a recent wobble: note the initial sensory contact, the feeling tone that arose, the subsequent urge, which defender (if any) became present, the action taken, and the result. Then, rewrite the sequence, imagining how an earlier arrival of a specific defender might have altered the outcome.
- ★ **A record of confidence:** List three experiences, observations, or teachings that serve as reminders of the value of this path. This record can be reviewed when motivation is observed to be low.
- ★ **Energy micro-steps:** Plan three tiny, doable actions to take the next time a craving visits. Report on what happened.
- ★ **Gatekeeper log:** For one day, every time an urge appears, record what the gatekeeper (mindfulness) noticed first (body, thought, feeling tone) and how quickly it was noticed.
- ★ **Ballast practice:** Choose a five-minute gathering practice (for example, focusing on the breath) and track mood/impulse levels before and after for a week.
- ★ **The wise question:** After a choice is made, write two lines: ‘What value did that serve?’ and ‘What would serve better next time?’

---

## Remember to remember

The Five Defenders are capacity, not theory. When rough water rises, let the gatekeeper notice the first tremor. Let ballast gather the mind. Ask the wise question and take one energetic next step in the direction that confidence

points to. Remember that these are the surgeon's tools for the healing of the heart. Let Mindfulness be the probe and Discernment the knife, supported by the steady, Courageous Confidence needed for the operation to succeed.

Practised together, these qualities shift from potentials to powers – unshaken by their opposites, reliable under pressure, and naturally allied to kindness. They defend the raft through the second stage of the journey – the work of abandoning and readying the heart for deeper calm and insight in the stages ahead.

*“The practice is like a cart with five wheels. If one is missing, it cannot run. Confidence, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom — all must work together.” ~ Ajahn Chah*

*“By effort, vigilance, restraint and self-control, let the wise one make for themselves an island which no flood can overwhelm.” ~  
Dhammapada*

[RAFT to Freedom](#) © 2025 by Dr Cathryn Jacob and Vince Cullen is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

To view a copy of this license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

