The Mindfulness Factor of Awakening

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In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, we've been talking about the various Dharma perspectives that are offered and the frameworks through which we can know our experience. These frameworks essentially help to point us in the direction of freedom.

One of the frameworks offered in the Fourth Foundation is the seven factors of awakening. This is a beautiful list of wholesome qualities that we could say are supports for awakening. The list consists of mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture—also sometimes framed as rapt interest—tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

These qualities are cultivated as we practice wise mindfulness. We can see how some of this works in our practice: just the meeting of experience with wise mindfulness, exploring "What is this? What is this?" In some ways, this practice of mindfulness is a practice of equanimity—learning how to be balanced, non-reactive to things as they are arising. And this, of course, cultivates concentration, stillness of mind.

There are different ways these factors are understood. One that I particularly appreciate comes from my teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He says that they flow one to another. If we start with wise mindfulness, begin meeting our experience, we naturally investigate what's helpful and what's not helpful, what leads to ease and peace and what leads to more contraction and suffering. This is the second factor of investigation. And these two together begin to arouse energy in the direction of practice. A sense of confidence arises and the direction of our minds orients towards the Dharma. The energy that arises around practice directs us to the practice.

My teacher says that these first three factors are the work of our practice. We engage with mindfulness, investigation, and energy. The rest of the seven factors are the fruits of the practice. We can't make them happen so much, but very naturally, as we investigate and have energy directed to the practice, a sense of delight and rapt interest begins to arise around our experience. We get really curious about what's going on. The stability of mind begins to create a base of tranquility. But it's not that we necessarily say, "Be tranquil." We don't do tranquility as much as it arises. Concentration arises as a result of mindfulness and energy coming together, stabilizing mindfulness over time. And all of them together—the mindfulness, the energy, the tranquility, and the concentration—create the conditions for equanimity to arise.

So in a way, the first three factors are our work, and those three create the conditions for the others to arise. That's one way to understand the seven factors. Yet it is also possible to do practices to support all of them. Later in the retreat we will be exploring equanimity practice in the Brahma Viharas, consciously orienting the mind towards equanimity—in particular, equanimity around relationship. And Philip was

pointing the other day to perhaps, for just short moments of time, being able to incline the mind towards tranquility, letting thought fall away for even a few seconds at a time. That may be a way to orient towards this enlightenment factor of tranquility. So both they are results of the practice, and we can incline and orient towards their cultivation.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the instructions around these seven factors are pretty simple. I'll read the section about mindfulness. As is usual for these lists, the instruction is repeated for each of the factors. So I'll read the instructions for mindfulness, and you can understand that this applies to all seven:

"There being the mindfulness enlightenment factor present, one understands, 'There is the mindfulness enlightenment factor in me.' Or there being no mindfulness enlightenment factor present, one understands, 'There is no mindfulness enlightenment factor in me.' And one also understands how there comes to be the arising of the unarisen mindfulness enlightenment factor, and how the arisen mindfulness enlightenment factor comes to fulfillment by development."

Basically: noticing the presence or absence of mindfulness, noticing its arising, and noticing how it becomes strengthened—how that enlightenment factor becomes powerful. I'll describe a little bit of my understanding of the distinction between simple mindfulness and the enlightenment factor of mindfulness.

One of my favorite authors is a monk who died some years ago, Nyanaponika Thera. He wrote an article called "The Power of Mindfulness." It was very inspiring to me that as mindfulness strengthens, it's not something we do so much as it becomes a state that we are living in, one that orients us towards the Dharma, towards understanding and wisdom. It really becomes a power in us. And to me, when it becomes continuous and stable, that is when it becomes the foundation for awakening.

And so these simple practices: Is the factor present? Is it absent? How does it arise and how does it come to fulfillment? Again, this kind of highlights the non-judgmental nature of the practice the Buddha taught. He says notice when it's present, notice when it's absent. The very noticing of that begins to instruct our hearts, really. Begins to teach our hearts what's helpful and what's not helpful.

As we sit here in this room practicing together, I think you all know when mindfulness is present and you are in the place of just witnessing. Maybe it's witnessing something really painful and challenging, and yet the heart doesn't clench necessarily around it when mindfulness is strong. When mindfulness is strong, when there's curiosity and balance of mind, the heart can feel relaxed, even if something difficult is happening. We can notice this.

And when there is a struggle, we can also be aware of that struggle and perhaps recognize, "Oh yes, this is caught. Caught is happening." We can be aware when the factor of mindfulness is not as strong as it sometimes is—not as a way to beat ourselves up or flagellate ourselves and tell ourselves we're a poor meditator, but simply to begin to recognize: What leads towards awakening? What leads towards

freedom? And what leads towards dukkha?

The language in these texts is so balanced. Notice it's present. Notice it's absent. Very naturally, as we notice its presence and absence, the mind begins to orient more and more in the direction of freedom.

I think this is partly the way we just work as organisms. When we turn our attention with mindfulness to challenge and feel the heart relax around that with mindfulness, the heart moves in that direction because, I think very inherently, very deeply, our organism wants to orient towards well-being.

And kind of poignantly, our strategies—and Greg was talking about this last night—all of our strategies of how we are in the world, well, they're trying to get us to well-being. But because we're not seeing clearly, because delusion is present, we mistakenly think that these patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion will somehow be what leads us towards well-being. But when we with mindfulness begin to open, with wise mindfulness begin to open to what's actually going on, the heart begins to understand at a deeper level what lies in the direction of ease and peace and deeper well-being, and what lies in the direction of more suffering.

I think the instructions in this teaching on the four foundations of mindfulness are really counting on this very natural process—that as we turn our attention with mindfulness to our experience, our heart gets the lessons of well-being and begins to very naturally move in that direction. It's a wonderful thing. It's a really wonderful thing.

So tonight I don't want to try to go over all of these seven factors of awakening. I'd like to just explore the practice of mindfulness. What does it mean to recognize the presence of the mindfulness factor of awakening? What does it mean to recognize it's not present?

This is a different level, in a way, of a talk on mindfulness. Often when we talk about mindfulness we're discussing how we pay attention, how we cultivate this capacity to be attentive to our experience. Here what I'd like to explore is: How do we recognize mindfulness itself? How do we know this quality itself? This is what the Buddha is suggesting. Recognize mindfulness. Get to know mindfulness. Get to know what happens when it's not there. In a way, this is encouraging us to investigate mindfulness itself.

I will give a heads up on this talk, because very often in my own language—I'd say influenced by Sayadaw U Tejaniya—I often use the word awareness as synonymous with mindfulness. So I may slip between those two. In this talk, I mean the same thing. I'm not using them in a different way. When I say awareness, I mean mindfulness.

One of the ways to investigate or be curious about mindfulness in this way of noticing its presence and absence is to basically begin to explore both sides of a phenomenon that's really common. You have all experienced this many times today.

The wandering mind is essentially mindfulness going away. When the mind returns from wandering,

mindfulness is back. And so we can look at the wandering mind—we can flip it around. Instead of thinking of it as an issue or a problem, we recognize that the wandering mind is helping us explore the presence and absence of mindfulness.

I've actually used this to my advantage. Anytime the mind wanders and I wake up again, I reflect, "Oh great, I've got an opportunity to see mindfulness re-arising." This is what the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta instructs us to do: notice mindfulness arising.

There's a lot we can learn about our minds as we explore mindfulness coming and going. First of all, we see the patterns that tend to stick us to them so that we lose mindfulness. We get familiar with the common ways that we get stuck. We also see—in spades—that the mind is out of control. It's not our fault. It's a process unfolding. Sometimes mindfulness is present, sometimes mindfulness is absent.

And yet there are conditions that can be inserted into this stream—one of them being sitting here in the room listening to a dharma talk on exploring mindfulness coming and going—that will create the conditions for curiosity, investigation, exploration of what's going on. And things change. It feels like I'm doing the practice, and yet really it's a process tumbling on, informed and conditioned by many other situations, conditions, phenomena.

We sit down to meditate and we try. "I'm going to be present." If there's an "I" in there, that "I" wants to be present, at least some of the time. When we sit down particularly, it's like, "Yes, I'm going to do this. I'm going to stay present." But how long does that last? If there were an "I" who had control, we wouldn't lose mindfulness. It's not self. And so we see this.

This exploration of watching mindfulness come and go—at least for me—has really helped to lessen the judging mind around the fact that the mind does wander. The moment mindfulness returns, that's an opportunity to see mindfulness re-arising. When I began reorienting around that as a practice—asking, "What does it feel like for mindfulness to come back?"—I found that moment to be really amazing. It's like, who did that? Again, that too is not self. You're just sitting there lost, and suddenly mindfulness comes back.

If there can be an interest in what it feels like for mindfulness to re-arise, then there's less of a tendency—at least I found for myself—to be frustrated or judge myself for having gotten lost in thought. It's like, "Oh, another opportunity! Can I see mindfulness re-arising? Can I see what happens?"

For me, this is one of the best places to begin exploring mindfulness itself: the moment that we remember. We've been lost in thought and we remember mindfulness. Actually, mindfulness remembers itself. It's not that we remember it. Mindfulness arises spontaneously, effortlessly. It's fantastic. We don't have to do it. It's just there.

In that moment, what is that like? I think I mentioned the other day that in the moment of mindfulness re-arising, it can take some time to attune to this investigation. When I started exploring this, I would be

back, and I'd already be back with the breath before I even recognized that mindfulness had returned. It was as if there was this automatic thing happening—the mind came back into mindfulness, and some knee-jerk process of practicing mindfulness with the breath had already taken me back to the breath before I even noticed, "Oh, I'm aware." That's kind of an amazing thing too, isn't it?

So I began being curious. Wherever it was that I woke up, recognizing mindfulness is back, I was just curious: What is it? What is it like to be aware now? What is that experience?

And as we explore it, particularly in the moment when mindfulness comes back, the more we get curious about that moment itself—that moment of mindfulness coming back—there's a contrast between what it's like now for mindfulness to be present and what it was like just a moment before when we were lost in thought. We can begin to get a flavor of the difference, that difference of the light coming on, of mindfulness re-arising. So just beginning to notice that, getting a sense of that quality of awareness, of mindfulness itself.

We usually cultivate mindfulness with what I might call prompted mindfulness. There's a phrase in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, describing two different ways mindfulness operates. One is called prompted mindfulness, and one is called unprompted mindfulness.

Prompted mindfulness is when we're already mindful and we're reminding ourselves: be aware, pay attention, know what you're paying attention to. That's a lot of the way we think cultivating mindfulness happens, and it's a lot of what we do here. When we are aware, we gently incline towards continuing awareness, often by attending to some specific experience like the breath or connecting with an object of attention. We prompt, we remind ourselves to be aware. The noting practice is a kind of prompting practice in a way, just reminding ourselves: aware, being aware. Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses those reminders: Am I aware? What am I aware of? Those are prompts for mindfulness. We don't even remember to ask the question unless we're already aware. So there's this prompted mindfulness.

Unprompted mindfulness is the spontaneous arising of mindfulness. And this is a way that we can begin to also cultivate mindfulness—to recognize this quality of mindfulness re-arising. What we see as we start to get familiar with that, what I've seen in my own practice around this, is that getting familiar with the moment of mindfulness returning begins to point out to us that it happens way more than we think it does. It's happening all over the place. It's just that frequently what happens as those little bubbles of mindfulness come up is that mindfulness will re-arise and then it'll land on something. We see a bird and then we start thinking about birds and what kind of bird it is. There's been a moment, a little flash of awareness, and then very quickly it goes because we're not so attuned to feeling that moment of mindfulness arising. Yet when we can start to get attuned to it, the familiarity with it makes it kind of point itself out to us.

This one practice is my favorite daily life practice: simply noticing mindfulness returning over and over and over again. As we begin to see how much that actually happens, it weaves a thread of little blips of

mindfulness throughout our day. And here, we actually have an opportunity to really string those together into a strong, powerful continuity of mindfulness—the awakening factor of mindfulness.

So in that moment of remembering, just see if you can be curious about awareness. What is this awareness? Get familiar with that.

It's also useful, I find, to explore when you know that you're aware, being curious about what that's like. You could play with this from time to time. If you are in a place where you're with the breath or attending to a flow of experience, you're knowing pretty clearly that there's a momentum, just check in. What is awareness? There's awareness and there's what's known in awareness. These are different sides to the equation: the awareness and what's known. Often in our mindfulness practice we can emphasize what's known and not be quite as familiar with the awareness itself.

And so the practice that Sayadaw U Tejaniya suggests of just asking, "Am I aware?"—as I said, if you ask that question, you are already aware. When I teach this, I often get the question: what's the point? Why bother? You're already aware, why bother asking the question? The point of asking the question is to highlight or be curious about awareness. What is aware? We don't often get curious about what awareness actually is. We're oriented to be curious about what we are aware of, not that we are aware. And that question—"Am I aware?"—highlights or encourages a curiosity about awareness itself. So you could play with that. Maybe the question could be something like, "What is awareness?"

Or sometimes I just use the simple word: aware.

When I first started practicing with this, I knew I was aware. It was clear—I knew I was aware. But I did not know how I knew I was aware. What I'd like to suggest, and this may happen for you also, is that you not try to figure out how you know that you're aware. Rather, simply know that you're aware and take it in. "Yes, I know I'm aware." It's kind of mysterious. I know that I'm aware. Just take that in—that you know that you're aware.

If you explore this over and over again, there begins to be a recognition or an understanding of what awareness is over time. I often suggest it's not like turning around and looking at awareness. It's not like turning back. It's more like stepping back. "Aware—what is aware?" Stepping back and knowing that you are aware, and just getting familiar with that experience.

Right now, do you know that you're aware? Just know that. That's enough right now. Do you know that you're aware?

So the exploration of mindfulness itself can happen in that moment when we recognize mindfulness returning. We can also be curious about the other side of the equation: Where does mindfulness get lost? Where does it go out? Where does it get hooked? There are so many ways that we get lost. We probably each have some very familiar, habitual ways that mindfulness gets lost.

Getting curious about how you lose awareness—how it happens, where it happens, when it happens. This curiosity is not about trying to force some kind of continuity. In fact, it's very different. It's more about recognizing, "Oh, I'm losing awareness in that situation. Let's see if we can understand what happens there, that awareness goes away." A kind of curiosity about how we're mindful and then the sand dribbles out of the bucket. How does that happen?

We can start to recognize perhaps places or locations. One thing I began noticing in my retreats is that there seemed to be particular activities or places where I would lose awareness. Washing dishes, maybe, or going into my room. If I had a single room—if I had a double, it was actually an incentive to continue mindfulness in the room because my roommate might walk in at any moment. But when I was alone, I could close the door and go, "Whew!" What's that about? What's going on there?

You may find that the bathroom is a mindfulness drain, or your yogi jobs, or if you decide to take a walk instead of doing the formal walking meditation. Just notice for yourself what aspects of your day you tend to lose mindfulness. Not to judge it, but rather as we start to notice the areas or places or ways that we lose mindfulness, then as we're heading into that activity or place, we can bring some attention.

I'll tell a story from my own practice. On one retreat, I was doing this kind of practice—where do I lose mindfulness?—and I kept noticing that I was waking up staring at myself in the mirror. I had lost mindfulness, but I was waking up while staring at myself in the mirror. Okay, for some reason I lose awareness here.

So I just started being curious about that. Not trying to force myself. This is not about doubling down and trying to force yourself to stay present while you're in front of a mirror, or wherever it is, in your room. It's more about curiosity. What is it that happens here?

I just explored this, and it took a long time—well, a long time on a month-long retreat. It probably took a week or so for me to really begin to see what was going on. And it wasn't some deep-seated longing to be seen or anything like that. It was just that I had a habit of looking at myself in the mirror and I was unaware.

At one point I recognized the place where I really saw this, as I was being curious about being in the bathroom where the mirror was. And of course the mind will blame things. At first I was blaming Spirit Rock for putting mirrors everywhere. It's their fault that I'm losing mindfulness! And then I began to just recognize, okay, this is in the mind here. What's going on?

I would notice that I was washing my hands and I hadn't yet looked up at the mirror. And then I would notice I was staring at myself in the mirror. Oh! Wow, look at that. Missed it again. Wow, isn't that amazing? So again, it was just the curiosity, the amazement of seeing that within a space of three seconds, I could lose mindfulness.

And then one day while I was washing my hands, I noticed the intention to look up. That was where I just

saw this was a habit—just a habit to look at myself in the mirror while washing my hands. When I saw that, when I was able to see that intention, I don't know exactly how it worked, but it just created the conditions for more continuity in that place.

So curiosity about where you lose awareness, what happens there—this is powerful practice. We also often lose awareness in states of mind: boredom, depression, anger. I think we each have our favorite patterns that we tend to get lost in. And again, there's a possibility of being curious. The pattern of exploration here is to begin to see: where do we go out?

First, the practice is noticing where do we wake up. We learn about our familiar patterns of getting lost because we find ourselves waking up over and over again—in a fantasy that was meant to counteract boredom, or in a low-level grade of depression, or fighting with somebody in our minds. We see our patterns over and over again as we wake up. Just that beginning to get familiar—waking up into depression, or waking up into a fantasy that's pulling us away from boredom, touching into the boredom—as we get familiar with those states of mind through waking up into them, then we can start to see how they have a sticky quality. We can begin to see them arising.

This is in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: the teaching around the hindrances is to notice when they arise. And so getting familiar with the way boredom arises—one of the things I found around boredom in my own practice is that sometimes experience would get really ordinary. It's not so special anymore. Kind of neutral. And the mind would just sink a little bit.

When we notice we're in the terrain of one of these familiar states, we can increase the curiosity, kind of like I did with the practice around the mirror. Just increase the curiosity. What happens? Why is this so sticky? Investigating where there's a pull to get lost in this. And as we get more familiar with what it's like to be mindful, we can begin to feel mindfulness weakening. We can get curious about that. What's happening there when mindfulness is weakening?

Let me offer one more example of exploring mindfulness getting lost. This one I really want to bring in because at this point in the retreat, this is happening for some of you.

I've heard you talking about this in the meetings. As the practice starts to deepen, sometimes awareness gets lost—not because we're losing interest or motivation to practice, but because the practice is deepening. Sometimes the conditions become unfamiliar enough that mindfulness gets lost. I'd like to describe a couple of ways this can happen.

One is what we sometimes call the purity-purification cycle. There are times, and I know several of you have described this, when you have a few hours or an afternoon, maybe even longer, of just this flow of awareness and open heart. It's one of those great stretches where you think, "How can I not just see this? Why would the mind do anything else?" You're just in that flow. And then suddenly anger comes back. Something happens in the dining room and everything explodes. What's going on?

This kind of pattern is very common, so if you've experienced it, you're right on track. One of the things that happens is that as the heart opens, it sometimes creates the conditions for those more latent tendencies underneath to arise—things that we've had a lid put on for a while. They sense that there's some room to come out. In effect, the purity has created the conditions for something that's been buried to come into our awareness. And we've been learning that it's the mindfulness, the coming into consciousness, where it can be freed, where it can be released. So it doesn't have to be a problem. This is simply the flow: purity, purification.

Another way I've seen mindfulness get lost as the practice settles is that we become familiar with how mindfulness feels with particular kinds of experience, particular kinds of objects—like being in a flow where you're effortlessly noticing sights and sounds and smells and body sensations, and another sound. It's a nice flow of experience, and there's a flow of mindfulness there.

Yet what often happens as mindfulness gets more continuous—and I'm going to use a hand gesture here, so if you have your eyes closed you might open them—is that mindfulness is meeting objects, and as it gets more and more continuous, it seems as though the mindfulness gets interested in new things, a different set of stuff, maybe some subtler level of experience. The mindfulness has actually dropped down to be interested in something else. But our agenda has us up here, looking for those familiar things, remembering how much fun it was being up here. Mindfulness will get lost because we're not tracking what it's connecting with.

I'll give an example. I was paying attention to the breath, and I could see that the attention was right with the breath. Then at some point I began feeling like the mindfulness weakened and left the breath. There was enough presence of mind, seeing the mindfulness weaken, that I thought, "Oh, come back to the breath." It would weaken again. And again the agenda: "Oh, come back to the breath."

This happened quite a few times, this weakening of the attention to the breath. At some point I recognized the attention was weakening with the breath, but the mindfulness was there. I didn't know exactly what it was doing, but I knew I was aware. Instead of having the agenda to say, "Okay, come back to the breath," it was like, "Well, I'm mindful—let's see what it's doing." And it dropped into a different level of experience. Until that point, I had been mostly attending to and knowing very simple, precise objects like breath and body. What this opened me to was vastness—a different kind of experience the mind was being drawn to in that continuity. And my agenda had me wanting to come back, come back, come back.

So sometimes, as the mind begins to weaken its attention to something, we can be curious: What is it doing? What's happening there?

There are different experiences we can have when mindfulness is strong. And this is another piece: if we find our way to a certain kind of clarity of mindfulness, really clear and precise knowing, we can have the sense or idea that that's it, that's what we're supposed to be doing. And that's one way it feels when mindfulness is continuous. I don't know how many ways there are that it feels as mindfulness is

continuous, because I've experienced many different ones now that I've let go of trying to find a particular state. Rather, I've become curious: "Oh, awareness is here. What's this? What's this?"

Those vast states or foggy states or states of low energy—awareness can be very clear of something that is very fuzzy. And so it can have a very different feeling than what we might normally think of as clarity.

Exploring the mindfulness itself, the coming and going of mindfulness, getting familiar with the quality of mindfulness itself, really begins to support the continuity. It supports that stability of mindfulness, which is what creates the power of mindfulness. That's where it becomes an enlightenment factor—mindfulness joined with wisdom, steady. The steadiness of that.

And that is onward leading, because the perspective of wise mindfulness has that kind of alignment with our organism of wanting to head towards well-being. It's onward leading to these other factors of awakening and to freedom.

There's so much to see. Sometimes Joseph would say, "The Dharma is vast." It's amazing what we can see if we let go of our ideas of what it's supposed to be like, or how I'm supposed to be doing anything, and just be curious. Aware of what? What's here?

So let's sit for a moment. Are you aware? What's awareness?

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