The Seven Factors of Awakening (Bojjhaṅga)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 38:46

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa.

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So first of all we revised or were introduced to the actual technique that we're practicing. And then we revised or were introduced to the hindrances, which is the Buddha's way of categorizing all those things that take us away from meditation. There are other categories, as you know, the ten defilements and the ten *anusaya*. Does anybody know how to translate that? I've forgotten it. Don't worry about it.

So these five hindrances are just a way of looking at things that arise in our meditation that take us away. The idea is that we can see what it is, we note it, we're clear about it and we know what to do to stop them taking over. We don't want to stop them arising because that's the purification process, but we definitely don't want to get taken over by them. We want to remain awake within them and to use them actually to investigate these three characteristics, especially the characteristic of suffering, *dukkha*.

Remember there's three types of *dukkha* that the Buddha points to. The first one is *dukkha-dukkhatā*, the suffering of suffering. It's the relationship we have with suffering which is the suffering, not the original stuff that comes up. So I'm sure you're all very clear on that by now—that the pain in the knee is not suffering but our aversion towards it, which is the actual suffering. And we can prove that to ourselves by finding an equanimity with this painful knee. And the same with our emotional life too. We can find a position with our depressions and anxieties and over-excitements and all that, in a way that it's carrying on and we're just with it. There's a separation. And I think for most of us, that tends to be 99% of the practice. It's 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration.

However, running concurrent with that are the seven factors of enlightenment, and conjoining that or running along that too are the five spiritual faculties. So the five and the seven meld into each other. The spiritual faculties are confidence, effort, awareness, concentration, and wisdom. I'm going to say wisdom for a moment. And the seven factors of enlightenment are awareness, effort, concentration, calmness and interest and equanimity, with investigation of the Dharma.

So first of all just talking about this faith business. Remember that in Buddhism, faith or confidence is not to be confused with belief. So belief is putting our confidence in a statement to the point where we believe it to be true. I believe it, see. So what that obviously does is stop investigation. And the whole of the Buddha's path is about self-realization—in other words, me realizing the truth. So if I just repeat the Four

Noble Truths, that is suffering and origin of suffering, which is desire, and then bow to the Buddha statue, you see, and I think that's it, well, it's an absolute waste of time.

So just believing in that sense that we might... Like so many things we believe that we don't know. We believe, for instance, that the Earth goes round the Sun. It doesn't happen perceptively, does it? Not for me, anyway. The Sun still comes overhead. But I have this absolute belief that it does, that we're going round the Sun. There's a whole load of science that I believe, but I don't know if it's true for me or not. I mean I haven't tested any of this stuff. So a lot of stuff we just believe because in a sense it's neither here nor there. Whether the sun goes round us or we go round the sun, as long as it's shining that's the important thing.

But when it comes to the Dharma, when it comes to the Buddha's teaching, it is about us realising what he realised. So that means that we have to go through the very same process he went through. In that sense he's not just an exemplar, he's the archetype. So there's a Buddha within us following that same similar path.

So this faith is more of a confidence, and the confidence is in the teaching. And the wisdom is in three stages. All of us came to this practice by hearing about it first of all, so it's received knowledge. And then if that interests us, if we're drawn to it, then we tend to read a bit more and eventually we think about it. And this thinking about it, then it becomes our own intellectual knowledge. Even if you quote everybody it doesn't matter, it's your quote from now on. So what was received now becomes your knowledge.

I don't know about you, but at one point I was trying to understand relativity theory. And I would read it and say to myself, oh yeah. And then I tried to explain it, it was impossible. I couldn't explain it. So it's that gap between thinking you've understood it and actually when you try to explain what it is you've understood, you get all tongue-tied. So that business of, you know, say dependent origination, you see, the Four Noble Truths—could you explain the Four Noble Truths to somebody else? If you can explain the Four Noble Truths to somebody else, then that means that you must have thought about it and you're able to pass on that information. If you can't do it, it's still at the level of received knowledge. That's the same with all the important teachings around dependent origination, around this *vipassanā*—could you introduce somebody to it?

And then of course that isn't enough, it has to be realized. And that's where the *vipassanā* comes in. So that's the next stage of *paññā*, of this wisdom—is when you actually perceive it for yourself, actually realize it for yourself.

So this confidence and this whole process of investigation and realization are linked. Obviously if you didn't have confidence you wouldn't go into it, full stop. You'd go into some other form of spiritual practice. So that confidence underlies really everything that we do, you see—putting faith in the teaching, faith in the tradition, faith in the Buddha. So these are called spiritual faculties. They're spiritual faculties. They're what enable us. They're what enable us to enter the path. Then there's concentration and effort,

and we'll come to that in a minute. And then there's awareness.

So if we now switch over to the seven factors, what we have is this—again, it's a repetition—this effort with concentration. So remember that concentration is a word that tends to make us tight, "concentration," mainly because of our school days or whatever. If you think of it much more as a steadiness of attention—how long can you hold your attention on something? That's what it's referring to, right? A real steady gaze. How long can you hold your attention? And these days, because of the enormous amount of information we have to process and computers and iPods and all the rest of it, our concentration tends to be a little bit short, especially, they say, of children. A couple of seconds and that's it, they're off somewhere else. So a lot of our practice is to bring us into a state of steadiness of attention. Steadiness of attention.

And the effort that we need is just to keep that. That's the only effort you need, is to keep that attention steady. Okay.

Now if the effort is too much, then what you get is restlessness, right? Now we're presuming now that the meditation is that these hindrances aren't there, you see, for the moment. We're presuming that in fact there's clarity in the mind, there's a stillness, and there's concentration. There's this steadiness of attention, a focus. If some other stuff comes in, apart from just maintaining that steadiness of attention—such as the idea of trying to see, trying to attain, trying to make the focus more focused—then you get this little bit of extra energy which starts shaking it. And before you know it, you find yourself getting quite restless. And at worst, if the energy is really over the top, there tends to be a collapse in the meditation. Some of you might have experienced that, where it just stops. And that's it, really. It's difficult to describe if you haven't experienced it. But you basically have to take an afternoon off and start again. And it just drops like that. And you just can't do it. And it's like... it's like when you, if you force yourself to run and run and run and run and eventually the body just stops. And that's that's that's a telltale to the meditator there—putting too much effort into it.

On the other hand, if you don't put enough effort, then this steadiness of attention, you see, drops you into a state of unconsciousness. And you'll know it's not sleep because when you fall asleep your body rocks and shakes and you start banging your head on the floor. But with this you're still sitting bolt upright, and anybody walking in the room would say, "Now there's a meditator," but actually you're just not there. You've gone asleep, you're completely asleep. And depending on the force of that concentration, you can be there for quite some time.

In the Hindu tradition, there's a tale of a guru who asks for some water and then enters into this state. And then many years afterwards, ten years afterwards, you see, he wakes up and his first words are, "Where's my water?" Nothing's happened for ten years. It's just one of these little tales you get about states of unconsciousness.

And unfortunately in the Theravāda tradition, sometimes they mistake that state of unconsciousness as a

jhānic state. So to me that's a little bit of a confusion, but let that be.

There's a place in Chiang Mai, Wat Long Pern, where you do this Mahāsi—he teaches this Mahāsi system. He's a very old man, he doesn't teach himself, but the system's there—in which you really go at it. I mean this is soft stuff compared to what they'll put you through. And then right towards the end of your three weeks—it's a three week bash—at the end of the three weeks you're not allowed to sleep. And during those three days, if you have a blackout, they suggest to you that was *Nibbāna*. Well, I've always thought that was a bit fishy. In fact, somebody turned up at the meditation centre in Sri Lanka and said this, and the chief monk there said to him, "Do you think it was *Nibbāna*?" He said, "No, I fell asleep." So it's a dodgy one, you know, you have to be careful.

So if that happens to you, if you wake up and you find yourself still sitting like this, you know, bolt upright, then you know—ah, concentration's good, the focus is good, I'm just not putting enough effort in, see, not enough effort to keep the wakefulness.

Now this tells us also something about good sleep, you see, because if a person finds difficulty in sleep—you know they can't sleep for one reason or another—often it's the case that the underlying mental state beneath that unconsciousness is in a state of restlessness, and it keeps bursting through and making us wake up, you see. So that's why the Buddha says if you practice loving-kindness before you sleep, it creates this lovely underlying state under sleep, you see. You sleep well, see. You can do it on the breath if you find the breath easier. But people I think often tend to rush around all day, come back, eat, watch TV and then just launch themselves into bed when it's time. And of course, you know, that hasn't been a preparation. You have to prepare yourself before sleep. You have to—very few people can just blank it out, and often that's not such a good sleep. So you have to wind down at the end of the day, wind down, play some sleepy music or something like that. And what you're creating is this subliminal level of beautiful mind.

So that's why they put effort and concentration together. Remember, I'm using the word concentration because that's the word you'll come across. But what we mean is steadiness of attention. And these two are always linked. They're always balanced together.

When there's a case of a monk, whose name escapes me, who is trying very, very hard, getting nowhere, and he decides that he's had enough and he's going to go back to the lay life, get married and have a decent time for a change. And when the Buddha hears about this, he goes and has a chat with him, and he says it's like tuning a string, you see. It's not too tight and not too slack. You've got to be able to tune the string on an instrument. It would have been a string instrument, the vīṇā. And that's how he describes it, you see. So just getting that point where the effort is just right.

Now, this is all part of our skills of meditation. This is us experimenting within ourselves to get the right level of concentration. Nobody can tell you that, nobody can—all the Buddha could do is give this guy an example, you know, that, okay, you know, sometimes it's too much, sometimes it's too... you've just got to

get it right, you see. So nobody can tell you how much effort to put in, you see. We ourselves have to discover our own level of effort, our own level of concentration and so on. And that's part of the practice, part of becoming skillful.

Now when I started teaching—this is going back to the late 90s really, and even before that I was doing a little bit—I used to teach in the method of my old teacher, Uja Naka. So even on a weekend retreat I had them up at half past three. Get in there, beat them up, you know, sit there, don't move. And there used to be a—like they're having these fusion reactors, this plasma—the room would be filled with this plasma, sitting there going through this dreadful pain. And I used to do these really heavy retreats, even for a weekend, you see, because that's what I used to do, that's what I was brought up to do, you see.

And nobody came back. Only the real hard nuts came back, you know, the bruisers. So I thought, well, something's wrong, you know. And I even did it up in my first long retreat, well, you know. And it was when I came to Gaia, you see. So I've a lot to thank Gaia for, because my four years spent here was really my teacher training college. And it was here just seeing what the teachers were doing and recognising that maybe this was a bit of the wrong tack. Because frankly, of all the people whom I remember—I mean you hardly remember people—but you see when the Mahāsi teachers came in the late 70s, a retreat would have 100, 150 people, you know. And in those days the men and women were all separated, you know, it's the eastern way, you see. And the side of the men was chock-a-block, knee against knee, and the women were just up here, a few, and we'd be looking over thinking, "Why can't we?"

And I don't remember them. I don't think any of them actually ever came back. There was—I mean very few that I remember. I got to Burma once and there were five or six. And I often wonder what happens to them, you know, whether they're even still practicing. I know one person gave up and he came to see me. I'd just ordained in Birmingham and it was this push, you see—push, push, trying to get the passing that insight. And he came to see me in Birmingham. I hadn't seen him for about four or five years. That year he'd spent ten thousand pound on crack, as he told me. This is an ardent meditator.

So just, you know, like too much effort, and then that sense of failure, you know what I mean? And within that, you give up, really. Mind you, in those days, there was a tendency to be the erroneous idea that, you know, you went at it for six months, and then it was sex, drugs, and rock and roll for the next six. Then you went to Burma to do a bit more headbanging. Because it never did get people very far, really.

So I began to reflect on this, on the way, you see, and Westerners, the Western culture and its efforts, you know, the way that we put tremendous effort into things compared to certain Eastern cultures. And I began to stress the other two factors, the one of interest and calmness. And people returned, you see. This was a great breakthrough for me.

And so this business of interest and calmness. So interest here is that fundamental curiosity that arises with intelligence. You see it with birds, you see it with all creatures that have some form of consciousness that we can conceive for ourselves.

I mean, I'll just give you this little thing, just to show you how intelligent. We think that we're the only species that plays with other species. You know, we play with dogs and cats. But I was at Candaboda once, waiting in a line for a meal, and the place was always full of dogs. And crows, you see, they used to just put the food out on the floor, on the ground. It's all gone now. It's a bit cleaner.

And there was a little dog, a little pup, chewing away at this rice. And a crow jumped towards it and bit its tail. And the dog turned around. See? And the crow bounced back. And the dog went back eating. And the crow jumped forward, bit its tail. And the dog turned around. See? And I thought, well, that's very clever. The crow wants the rice.

So he went the third time, and the dog went, and then just walked away, fed up with it, you see. And the crow, I swear, looked longingly after the little pup and then flew away. But when you see things like that, you think, well, a crow could become fully liberated.

So this business of curiosity is just a fundamental quality of this intelligence, you see, this curiosity. And the word interest, I think, gets across the idea that it's joyful. So in the list of seven factors of enlightenment, you'll see the Pali word *pīti*. And this *pīti* is also put with these absorptions we're talking about, which means a mental state, a pure mental state of happiness. But here, it's the joy that arises when you're interested in something. So think about it, you know, the times when you've really been interested in doing something. It's been full of joy, see?

Now, even that interest can become too interested. It can take on this business of wanting to know too much. And that's why it's balanced with calmness, okay? So calmness and interest. And again, it's the usual thing. If you get too calm, you fall asleep. And if there's not enough calm, the interest gets too excited and you find yourself getting restless. So it's always this lovely balance.

And the final one is equanimity with *dhammavicaya*. So in the standing meditation that I did at the beginning there, trying to point out the quality of equanimity. See, the quality of equanimity is to come from a place of don't know, to come from a place of not sure, as if this is the first time we've ever done it. The beginner's mind, as Zen would say. And it's also not an emotional involvement. It's not coming from a prejudicial place. So these two factors describe this even-mindedness. That's another way of putting equanimity.

Unfortunately, both the word equanimity and even-mindedness puts the accent too much upon thought, but it's also an emotional state, see? It's also a calm, even emotional state. And in a sense, it's the qualities you would expect of a judge, you see? You don't want the judge to get caught up in the clever arguments of lawyers, and you don't want them to get caught up in the baying of the crowd, you know? Hang them, see? You want to keep equanimous, you see, above it all. And this allows us to investigate the Dhamma.

Investigating the Dhamma simply means the three characteristics, the five defilements, the five hindrances that we've been talking about, the four noble truths. It can be anything which will then lead to

understanding, understanding to liberation.

Now if there's not that equanimity there what we're tending to do is to look for something that we've conceived see and the mind is very clever remember. So, even though, I mean, we've heard about these words *nibbāna* and all that, you see. So, unwittingly, we can be searching for or looking for this experience. We can have some idea of what it means to be a stream-enterer. Woo! See, and things like that.

And what that does is it distorts the looking. And with expectation of that sort, even if it's quite unconscious, yeah, there arises a certain disappointment, disappointment that it's not happening. There arises a feeling that you can't get it because you've got this ideal in your head about what a spiritual insight is or where you should be. So again, that leads to discouragement, giving up the path.

And if unfortunately you do see what you've conceived then surely you're deluded you've simply manifested what you wanted so I had one lovely experience with a man at the centre came back and said that he'd had this amazing experience believe it or not while he sat on the toilet. Now if you remember Luther also had his great insight while evacuating so those are moments of relief and release remember so one can expect to have amazing insight on the pot.

Anyway, he came back. I mean, the way he described it, it was obviously, I mean, a lovely mental state, but it was obviously from his description. But there was no way he was going to believe it wasn't *Nibbāna*. That was it. He was convinced that he'd had this experience, and that's it. So now, what happens to such a person? Well, they might stop investigating. They might think, well, that's it, and that's it. Why should I carry on practising or anything else?

So there's always that problem that when we have an experience, we overestimate. The overestimation is often coming from some preconceived idea as to what a spiritual insight is. So generally speaking, if we have an insight, you might go to a teacher and say what it is, and he might explain it and put it into context. But the spiritual progress is that as you go along your next insight throws light on the one you've had before so eventually there comes a balance about what you feel you've experienced and what you haven't so it's best not to decide you can definitely if you have an experience you can definitely say what it was that's not a problem but it's rating it which can be the problem see.

And it's best just simply not to rate it but to accept but just to say to yourself this is what I experience and this is what I have come to understand see and what I've come to understand ought to affect us systemically you see it's no good going around saying you know had this amazing experience into interconnectedness and then going around shooting everybody I mean it's not. That interconnectedness when it falls systemically into the heart expresses itself as love. And that's what love is, isn't it? It's the heart's connectedness with all beings. And if it doesn't do that then it's just been a head thing. It hasn't been a real spiritual experience. That's the difference.

Now you'll notice that all these factors everybody has. The only thing that turns them into factors of enlightenment is *dhammavicaya* investigating the dhamma everybody's got concentration of calmness and interest and effort and confidence in one way or the other. But it's actually getting all those qualities and placing them into this investigation that brings about spiritual insights.

Now when we begin meditating when we sit like this you see you're trying to manifest these factors both mentally and physically okay so physically you're calming you're still in the body mentally you're calming the heart you're silencing the mind okay and you're finding a position within yourself as the objective observer. Ñāṇaponika, in his very good book, The Heart of Buddhist Meditation, calls it the observation post. It's like a crow's nest on a ship. You found a particular place. These factors of enlightenment, as you move to that place, withdraw into that place.

So all these factors of enlightenment are in the looking that's why awareness is the governing factor everything I've said this evening is virtually a complete waste of time because if you centred the whole of your effort just on this awareness all the faculties come up to support it it's a natural movement of these faculties to support that awareness that's why we always start off with the breath and establishing awareness this mindfulness on the breath see now remember what we're talking about is this *satipaññā* this awareness intuitive faculty within us some traditions call it buddha nature and what it's trying to do is to abstract itself to bring itself out of this morass of the psychophysical organism and as it does so and it finds this place where it can observe the body, heart and mind it is pure awareness at that point and it's when the light goes on of the intelligence that all these factors are already there in the looking that's why.

We can have all these factors there when there is enormous restlessness, enormous dullness, the mind expressing itself, the heart emoting, and yet you can maintain this poise. Okay? But we get it through the practice of, first of all, quieting the body and slowly raising ourselves up to the level of the objective observer. See? Perfectly clear.

So our practice, you see, is to get always into that position of the observation post, right? And once we're there, all the factors must be there, see? All the factors must be there. And that's basically our practice. That's what we're constantly trying to do.

And once it's there, you see, this intelligence, this curiosity is able to investigate. And in investigating what it sees what it's experiencing out there in the mind, in the heart, out there, you see, that's why the noting word is so powerful, because it pushes things away from us, makes us look at them as objects, yeah? It slowly begins to realise its own nature, see? That's the process.

So these seven factors you'll see some are passive and some are active. It's that quality of the feminine and the masculine. So eventually we ourselves you know, we ourselves begin to develop those two qualities within ourselves, their balance, you see, the passive and the active, the feminine and the masculine. And what balances it is awareness.

So you have, on the more passive side, you have the concentration and the calmness and the equanimity. And on the active side, you have the effort, the interest, and the investigation. And they have to be absolutely balanced for insight to come.

So, one of our dangers, now that we know all this, is to be worrying about whether my interest is high enough. So that's why I say, abandon all that completely. Forget you've heard a word. And just put your whole effort into just this moment to moment awareness. It's enough. It's enough.

And that's what the Buddha says in the Discourse on How to Establish Mindfulness. He says, start off by observing the breath, contacting the body in the breath, and you know it's long or short, coarse or fine. And then as you keep watching it, you train yourself on that until the body's become a bit calmer, the heart's calm, the mind is still, you see. And then you begin to observe. See, by now you've found this observation post. And then you begin to observe the quality of impermanence. The beginning and end of each breath. And he says, just keep doing this until there is enough awareness and enough intelligence, this intuitive intelligence, for insight to arise.

So, essentially the practice is very simple very simple indeed doesn't take a great big intellect so remember the story of the monk who was so dull that he said when he learned a phrase of the Buddha's teachings because in those days nothing was written it was all you know rote learned when he learned a phrase from the Buddha's teaching it knocked the phrase he'd just learned out of his head see and his brother said he was just too dull to be a monk and he'd better go back to lay life and when the Buddha heard this he went to see him and he gave him a very simple exercise of giving him a clean cloth and he said just rub it and wipe your face from the sweat and just keep saying impermanent impermanent and before long he was fully liberated it didn't work for me so.

So there's a special, the Buddha has a special insight into where you are you know and this story is told to show that you know this is not, you don't need intellect as opposed to that there's a story in the commentary about a monk who's extremely clever a real scholar and an expert and all his students become liberated and then he starts thinking to himself How is it I'm the teacher and everybody else and all these students, I'm not liberated?

So he goes to see them. And one after one, they see this guy's just too intellectually conceited. So they kept saying, well, you know, I'm not really the one to help you. Why don't you go and see so-and-so? And he went all the way down the line until they gave him to a child. That was very humiliating, but he thought, well, I'll have a go.

And the child took him to this anthill. And when ant hills are, when ants move out of their ant hills, snakes live in it. You become a snake's home. So he said, supposing this ant hill had six holes and you wanted to get the snake out, what would you do, you see? So the teacher said, well, you'd just stop up five holes and it would have to come out from the sixth.

He said, that's what you've got to do. Stop the five senses and everything comes out through the mind. And observe, you see. They went away and in no length of time fully liberated.

I hope my words have been of some assistance. May you by your wise reflection and excellent development of the seven factors of enlightenment arrive at that wonderful place *Nibbāna* sooner rather than later.

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