The Buddha's Prescription For Happiness: Seven Factors Of Enlightenment

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 43:17

So tonight, since we've been having a series of talks on this prescription for happiness that these authors wrote—oh, that reminds me of one other thing, the happiness books. Who's reading the happiness books right now? Who's in the middle of reading them? Remember, it's kind of a lending library, so when you finish—somebody was asking if there's one of those books available—if and when you do finish, please bring them up here so other people can use them.

That book on happiness has a prescription for happiness that we've been going over extensively. We're examining in detail over the course of nine weeks these nine different choices, and I've found it very valuable. I hope you do too. Last week we started talking about suffering again and that first noble truth leading to doing this practice.

Tonight I thought I'd give another prescription list for happiness, which comes out of the Buddha's teachings. He had a few different lists for creating happiness in your life. Probably the most well-known is the list called the Eightfold Path, which is his fourth noble truth. That is a prescription for happiness in the full spectrum of one's life, which includes our interactions with others—right speech, action, and livelihood—our meditation practice—effort, mindfulness, and concentration—and also the development of wisdom, of right thought and right understanding. That's one prescription he gave. He said if you follow this path, you will find greater and greater harmony.

Another list and prescription he gave—a recipe, one could say, for happiness, the happiness of the liberated heart—is the list of the factors of enlightenment, the seven factors of enlightenment. I wanted to talk about this recipe or prescription for happiness tonight. I realize that people who've done the beginning class have heard the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths and the Five Hindrances and those classical lists, but I have a feeling that there are a number of people who aren't so familiar with this list of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Buddhist prescription for the highest happiness.

This list, by the way, is in the discourse on the meditation practice, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The last foundation is mindfulness of the Dharma, or of the dharmas, and what that means are different principles for understanding the awakening heart. One of the main aspects of that fourth foundation is understanding the seven factors of enlightenment.

There are balancing qualities among these factors. Three of them are energizing, one could say activating factors. Three are stilling or stabilizing factors, tranquilizing factors. And then there is one factor that

balances both ends of the spectrum and also cultivates all of them. So that's one way to see this list.

It starts with that balancing factor, and that is—guess what?—mindfulness. This is the first of the factors of enlightenment. Mindfulness is talked about as the most wondrous way for overcoming sorrow and lamentation and grief. In some translations, it's said this is the sole way—it depends what translation you use. In any event, this quality of mindfulness is really important for complete awakening.

What mindfulness is—probably you have your own definition of it—but the basic principle of mindfulness is simply knowing what's happening right now. That is being awake for this moment's experience. But being awake in a special way that is not only aware of what's happening, but not having a reaction to what one sees, not clinging to what is pleasant, not condemning or pushing away what is unpleasant, and not taking ownership of your experience, not saying "I" or "me" or "mine"—this is my thought, this is my confusion, this is my pain, this is my fantastic meditation experience—but just seeing the whole process in an impersonal way: this is what is unfolding before us.

The awareness that recognizes that does not have to grasp at the experience and take ownership of it. This is what is called not identifying with your experience. When you identify with it, you take it to be mine. And this is where we create a lot of problems. There you are sitting, minding your own business, and all of a sudden a thought comes that triggers off some anger. There is often the tendency to say, "Oh, look what an angry person I am," or "Why am I having this thought? I have so much anger in me." That's the process of identification.

You just got caught. When you start to blame yourself for these emotions that arise, or these thoughts that arise, or these sensations in the body that arise—or start to take credit for all the good stuff. "Hey, that was a pretty neat thought. I hope everybody sees what a wonderful person I am if they only knew what a beautiful guy, because I just had this nice thought." And it just really popped into the screen. When you take ownership for it, you are setting yourself up for the condemnation when things aren't so sweet. Because as soon as you say, "Look at that," it's one step away from saying, "Oh, look at that." And it's very freeing to see this is just arising and passing away on its own.

This is what mindfulness truly is. Mindfulness has some amazing properties. One of the most powerful aspects of mindfulness is that it is a purifying force. Every moment you see things or are aware of things without grasping at the pleasant or pushing away the unpleasant or that sense of ownership for your experience, you are deconditioning those habits of grasping, aversion, and delusion. So although it might not seem very profound to feel a breath and know that you're breathing, it is a moment of purification that is undercutting that habit of identification and reaction. Very, very powerful. It is actually the most powerful purifying force of all. You cannot create unwholesome karma in the moment that you are mindful. In fact, in a moment of true mindfulness, you can only create wholesome karma.

So, sounds like a pretty good motivation, huh? One of my main motivations when I practice—and I said this in the Labor Day retreat that just happened, which was a wonderful retreat—as I'm practicing,

reminding myself that every single moment of mindfulness counts. Every single moment I'm deconditioning those habits of grasping, aversion, and delusion. So don't underestimate them. And they are planting seeds that are very powerful, have very powerful ripenings.

There are a number of different ways one can be mindful. In that discourse on mindfulness, the four foundations: mindfulness of the body; of our sense experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch; mindfulness of the feeling tone of experience, that is the flavor of experience, if it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. So you're sitting here and all of a sudden you might hear a bird, if it's during the day, a bird from the outside whistling. Now you might be very mindful and aware that there's that sound, and even if you don't take ownership or get into a reaction of, "Oh, I love that, that's so beautiful," it has a pleasant tone to it. The sweet bird song. And the Buddha said, if you're mindful of that flavor and just acknowledge it—"Ah, this is pleasant"—there is less of a likelihood that you will grasp out of trying to hold on. Just, "Oh, this is a pleasant moment."

Just like if you're sitting and there's a screech of a truck or some loud sound. "Ah, this is unpleasant," which is very different than, "Darn it, I hate when trucks interrupt me for my meditation." Catching that unpleasantness of it without a judgment, you are a whole lot more likely to not jump on that train of rejection. Just, "Ah, this is an unpleasant moment." Or, "This is a neutral moment." So he said that's another area of mindfulness.

He also said you can be mindful of all the thoughts and feelings that come through. Mindful of whether they're pleasant or unpleasant. "Ah, this is thinking. Oh, this is feeling." Confusion or joy or whatever. And the key to being mindful of thoughts and feelings is not to get caught in the story, but simply to know that thinking is happening or knowing that this emotion is happening. And then the last area is mindfulness of the Dharma, these different principles, like the Four Noble Truths or the Seven Factors of Enlightenment.

So basically, the idea is it doesn't matter what you're mindful of. The moment of mindfulness is a moment of clear recognition without attachment or aversion or identification. It's a purifying force. It's a balancing force between these other six factors—we'll come back to that at the very end. And it is also the way to cultivate all the other qualities; all the other factors are cultivated through mindfulness.

So now we'll go to the three activating qualities. The first of these is the quality of investigation. When I say these different factors, I'm talking partly on meditation practice, partly with reference to meditation practice, but also these can be cultivated in your life.

It's not like you have to wait until you do a retreat or you meditate to cultivate them. They are gifts that we can evoke that lead to happiness, just like the ones that those authors talked about. In the same way, you can consciously cultivate all of these factors.

Investigation. What that means is a kind of curiosity, a kind of interest in life. It's one thing to be attentive and be aware, but there's a quality of interest, of discovery, that is a very enlivening attitude to bring to

your awareness. If you're sitting here saying, "Breathing in, breathing out," and you're feeling your breath because you know that that's the basic instruction, but you have the attitude of "In, out, here's another breath, we just had one a moment ago, what's the big deal?"—it becomes kind of boring. It seems like a very stagnant exercise.

But let's try this for a moment. Close your eyes and imagine you've just been born. Imagine you've just come out of the womb and you're about to take your first breath. Here it is, the start of your life. Can you be here for it? It makes it a bit more interesting, doesn't it?

Now, before you open your eyes, let's try one more. Imagine you've come to the end of a full life, and you're about to take your last breath into the great mystery. How present can you be? Here it is, your last breath. You probably don't want to miss it.

Now, one last thing. Let go of first and last, and just recognize that this breath has never been here before and will never be here again. This moment of life is here for us, and we have the capacity to be present for it. Can you be here for it? This breath is sustaining you, keeping you alive.

You can open your eyes if you like. Did you notice any difference in the flavor of your presence? That's not cheating. You might think it's a gimmick, but if it gets you here, it's okay. And actually, that last one isn't a gimmick—that's the truth. It's never been here before, and it'll never be here again, this moment. If it helps you to do something like first breath or last breath, which I do from time to time, use it. If your head was being held under water, that breath would be very precious to you.

This whole quality of discovery is, for me, one of the great motivators in practice. It's like letting a little kid in you come out that has this sense of wonder. Wow! Have you ever wondered how it was that you got in this body that we call you, that everybody agrees to call Marcial or John or Miriam or James? How is it that life got here and coalesced into that body? It's all quite mysterious and miraculous. And if you let yourself have that kind of awe and wonder, that quality of investigation and interest is not very out of reach. It's just remembering the childlike wonder and not taking this moment for granted.

That is a factor of enlightenment.

In the same way, you can turn this investigation toward any experience. Suppose you have a feeling of fear or sadness, a strong emotion. The usual response is, "Oh no, I don't want to go there." For most of us, most of the time, we distract ourselves or seek some kind of entertainment or diversion. But you can't run away from it anyway. Usually the more you try to run away, the more easily it catches up.

But if instead you turn your awareness to that experience and say, "Wow, what is fear anyway? What's the experience of fear? Let's check this out." For me, another little game that I play is imagining that I'm an alien from outer space who has landed in this body, and it's my job to report back to

my superiors what it's like to be in the human condition. Wow, what's fear? Look at that! Oh, what is

happiness? What is joy? Not answering with an analytical answer—not "happiness is..."—but rather, what are the components of it? How does it feel?

It's bringing that kind of interest and curiosity that really helps you connect with experience and keeps it from just being another mechanical exercise. It brings a real juice to practice. This is the second factor of enlightenment.

The third factor, and the second of the activating factors, is the quality of energy or effort—these terms are often used synonymously. *Viriya* is the word. This practice takes some effort. It just doesn't happen on its own. If you brought somebody in off the street and said, "Okay, sit down here, feel your breath, notice what's happening, when your mind wanders come back to right now, try not to fantasize, and just be here, and do it for the next forty-five minutes"—most people would say, "Later for this. Don't sign me up."

It takes some real understanding of the value, or at least a real curiosity that tries it out. When you see for yourself that there's some value in it, then you want to put in the effort to pay attention. Because it's kind of like going against the grain, or going upstream from the current of reacting to all the stimuli that most of us process all the time—stimuli which leads us to topple forward to the future or topple back to the past. It takes real intention to land here in the present moment. It takes effort. It takes energy.

The interesting thing about effort and energy is that as you put in the effort to be mindful, it actually brings about energy. It brings about an enlivening. When you do periods of practice, after a few days, when at first the energy seems low and the mind isn't reacting so much, it's common for there to be a lot more energy than most of us have available normally—because we're not reacting and we're not getting confused.

This is actually one of my motivations for practice, another little gimmick I use. I just get fascinated by the fact that one can go on a whole lot less sleep than one would in normal daily life. It's one of the motivations for me to be mindful as much as I can—this little game. How is it that I can go on five hours, or four hours, or even three hours, or even less sometimes, day after day? It's amazing, because an energy opens up to you. This is not all the time for everyone, but for some it's not uncommon at all. Energy picks up tremendously as you go through periods of practice, just because the mind isn't getting lost and reactive. Effort begets energy.

It's the same way in your daily life, probably, when you've got a project to do. At first there's the inertia that just says, "Oh, I don't know if I'm up to this"—which can also be, "Oh, I don't know if I'm up to getting this body out of bed in the morning." You can stay there for a long time in bed. But once you make the effort to get your body out of bed and you get going, there's a different kind of inertia—that of activity. Once you give yourself to a project and let yourself get into it, it's not that you have to keep pushing yourself: "Go ahead, go ahead." There's a point that most of us experience in activity where it just kind of gets you on a roll, and you want to put your heart into it until you get really tired. That initial effort leads to an energetic experience. So effort is a factor, and it's simply the effort to be mindful.

Investigation, effort, and then the third of the energizing factors of enlightenment is probably the most popular factor, called joy—also known as rapture. Sounds cool, huh? *Pīti* is the name in Pali. Pīti—not pity, but P-I-T-I—means a real joy that comes as you are more and more mindful. As that energy picks up, you become like this energy system, and sometimes it's quite exhilarating in a fantastic way.

Have you ever felt that wholehearted aliveness, where it's bubbling, the energy is bubbling through you? Sometimes it can actually be disconcerting when you feel that the energy is a bit more than you can handle. I remember one time in practice where I was paying attention and I was just filled with—not only this energy, but at first this excitement, and it felt really great, like I was getting higher and higher. I was saying, "Wow, who needs drugs?"

This is incredible. But at some point it became, "Whoa, what if I explode?" And I got really unsettled, to say the least, and went running to the teacher saying, "Hey, what's going on here?" At which point Joseph said, "You see, you thought this was a dry, brittle practice. Not much is going on." Because I wanted the juice of devotional practice. And he said, "Okay, you just do this, this, and this"—there are ways to ground yourself. And mostly it's getting used to opening up and becoming familiar with holding more and more energy.

Another way to define joy, another aspect of this rapture or piti, is a keen interest in what's going on. You just become very focused and interested. Just like in your daily life, sometimes when you've really given yourself wholeheartedly to something, there's a kind of fullness and aliveness and joy just from giving yourself fully over to it. This is very much akin to piti, to this rapture. And it comes through the development of strong mindfulness.

But it can also come in one's daily life, even not on an intensive retreat experience, just by letting your natural curiosity give rise to real interest. The more you pay attention, the more fascinating things become.

I've used this example some of you have heard. When I was younger, I would do this a lot, and even now I still do—looking at a shaft of sunlight. Have you ever looked at a shaft of sunlight coming through the window? Have you ever looked up close? What's going on there? How many people have done that? There's this whole dance going on there of dust. And if somebody said to you, "What are you doing?" and you answered, "I'm looking at some dust"—yeah, right, okay, sounds like an interesting day, I'll see you later. But actually, it's fascinating, isn't it? Wow. Look what's going on there.

For me, I used to do that a lot. It was like there was this doorway to this whole world that I was normally blind to. This intense, keen interest—you can bring it to anything. If you can bring it to dust dancing, you can bring it to anything. It's all magical.

I remember having this conversation with my son Adam when he was about four or so. He was talking about magic, and he asked, "Well, what is magic?" And I was saying how it's all magical. "Oh yeah? Well,

what's magical?" I don't remember if we looked at some dust, but then I started going around the house. There was a cassette of Sesame Street on the table and a cassette player. I said, "Here, I'd like you to see this. What is this?" "Oh, it's a cassette." I said, "Bert and Ernie are ready to come alive for you. Watch." Press the button and there it comes: "Everyone makes mistakes, oh yes they do." That's my favorite Sesame Street song. How does that happen? We looked for Bert and Ernie. Where are they? I don't know.

I say, it's magic. And then we turn on the light switch. How does that happen? I don't know. How does it happen? I don't know either. It's all magic.

How does it happen that I'm having a thought and then giving rise to some words through potassium sodium chemistry in my brain, which translates into action and words that come through the vocal cords, travel through space, hit your eardrum, get translated into information in your brain—and I can say something like "beautiful" and you can have one reaction, or I can say something like "ugly" and you can have another reaction? How does that happen? I don't know. It's magic.

That's the kind of keen interest or joy that you can have just by surrendering. That's this quality of awe and wonder, which is a kind of further step of investigation—letting yourself be amazed by it all. So all of these are quite enlivening aspects that come along with mindfulness.

Then there are three factors that balance out that energetic, activating side, which are stabilizing, stilling, composing. And the three factors begin with the factor of calm. It's wonderful, isn't it? You come to sit. That's probably one of the first things that people get in touch with when they're not very restless. As you sit here for forty minutes or so and you stop the busyness and the stimulation and you just try to go within, there's a calming effect.

Even if you're spacing out, even if you're drifting off, even if you're on Pluto for all intents and purposes, you might think, well, what's the point of that? But actually, one thing that you're cultivating, which is a very rare experience in this world that most of us live in, is calm. If nothing else happened, just giving yourself a break from the action is incredibly helpful.

And there can be all different levels of calm. There can be a deep, profound calm that is experienced in the meditation that perhaps many of you know for yourselves. This is a kind of tranquilizing, a stilling, a settling of the energy. And it's a factor of enlightenment.

A second of these stilling qualities is the factor of concentration. And it's slightly different. It can be with calm, but not necessarily. Calm is a kind of settling down, a stilling that comes from settling down. Concentration or samādhi is a stilling that comes from focusing. It comes from a one-pointed connection with what's happening. You can actually be concentrated and not necessarily calm, just like you can be calm and not necessarily concentrated. You probably know that one, right? "Oh, I wasn't quite here, but it's calm." Like I say, that's okay. But if you want the full flowering of the practice, concentration is a very key component.

And what concentration? There are a few different kinds of concentration. One kind of concentration is fixing the attention on one particular point, like the breath, or like loving-kindness and repeating a phrase over and over, or like an energy center, or some kind of visualization, or staring at a candle. Just unifying the mind. I think it's in Jesus' teachings—he says, "If thine eye be single, then you will know the kingdom of heaven." That is what he's talking about: unifying the mind. The mind in samādhi, or in the deep states of concentration, what are called the jhānas—deep states of absorption.

But you don't have to have that kind of laser-like concentration in order for awakening to happen. You can have a concentration that is called moment-to-moment concentration, or khaṇika samādhi, which is a connection with this moment, and a connection with this moment, and then a connection with this moment. Even if it's changing experience, you can have an awareness of the breath, and then awareness of a sound, and then awareness of an emotion, and awareness of a sensation, and be connected from one moment to another. That is also sometimes called vipassanā concentration. That kind of connection comes from moments of mindfulness building on each other.

So the more effort you put into being mindful, the greater the moments of mindfulness, particularly in a retreat setting, and those moments of mindfulness build a momentum to develop into concentration. That is one of the reasons why retreats are so valued and so powerful—because they create a situation where there's minimal external input, external stimulation, where there's a whole support of other people having the same task or goal of being here, and you are gently reminding yourself over and over: come back.

come back. And the way you come back is the key to concentration—not with judgment, but with a sincere commitment to return. Through that kind of concentration, you start to penetrate through the veils of confusion and illusion.

So this is the second of the stilling factors. The third, which is the last of the seven factors, is the quality of equanimity, called upekkha in Pali. Equanimity is another facet of stilling. There's a stilling in the calm that comes from settling. There's a stilling of concentration that comes from focus. And the stilling of equanimity is that of non-reactiveness—a spaciousness that allows for anything, seeing all the joys and the sorrows, open to it all.

Equanimity is different from indifference. That's the near enemy of equanimity—indifference or apathy, where it seems like you're not ruffled or bothered by things, but only because you're removed or detached. "Oh well, who cares?" That's not equanimity. Equanimity still has caring in it, but there is a spaciousness and an ease. The moment that precedes the liberated heart or mind, that experience of awakening, is usually defined as high equanimity—where there's a balance, where all the factors come into balance, and there is a deep ease that lets go of any movement of trying, of making anything happen, of becoming. That opening of equanimity is the preceding moment to the liberated heart or mind.

So those are the stilling factors: calm, concentration, equanimity. The energizing factors are investigation,

energy, and rapture or joy. And mindfulness is the balancing factor because it has both an alert and a receptive quality to it. That's where the balance lies. You have to have some alertness to know what's happening, but there's also a receiving of the experience—not pouncing on it, just being open to it. This curious property of mindfulness is that it balances both sides of that equation, and it also cultivates all the other factors.

So that is the prescription the Buddha gave. When all of those factors are ripe, there is the experience of waking up. The seven factors of enlightenment.

A student named John raised a question: "The way you presented that, it could easily be taken as very intimidating—that awakening is a big deal, that you have to go through all of these steps. The teaching I've loved so much is Ajahn Amaro's teaching that enlightenment is in every moment of existence."

Both are true. It's just what vantage point you want to take. Enlightenment is a big deal—it is. And it can be made to seem very distant. This is actually one of the fascinating things about a retreat blending Tibetan Dzogchen practice, which is really about letting go and not trying at all, with Theravadan practice. Although Ajahn Amaro is more of a Dzogchen style, most of the Theravadan world, and most of what the Buddha taught, emphasizes tremendous effort. "Strive on diligently," he said. It does take tremendous effort.

Now, if you get put off by that, the thing to keep in mind is this: to be in this moment requires very little effort. In fact, it's a not-doing—just receiving this moment. And that is absolutely true.

In the moment that you're mindful, all of those factors can be present. But if you're talking about the liberated heart—more than just this moment, but an actual uprooting of tendencies—this takes tremendous work. This is not something to simply kick back and wait to come.

At various times in my own practice, I've been very motivated to work my butt off because I could see the more energy and effort I put into being mindful, the more the practice would come alive. That's just how it works. And at other times, I could see I was beating myself, knocking my head against the wall because I was trying too hard. And I went a whole other direction, took a whole other approach of really just relaxing.

They're both true. It's not that one is the right way and the other is the wrong way. If you're looking at it from the perspective of surrendering to this moment, it's available in every moment. If you're looking at it as a process of purification, of cultivation, then it's more than just relaxing back—it takes tremendous intention. So they're both true, and you use whichever one inspires you for where you're at in your practice, which can change over time.

Someone shared that they had an email from a friend who said, "I have been flying out of control all summer." That's the opposite of what we've been talking about. It means whirling from event to event without any mindfulness at all—that feeling of "Wow, this past month was a blur." The point is, once you

get the habit of mindfulness, you know when you're passing through your life without any mindfulness. You're not there. Everything is on the periphery. It's as if you're flying along out of control. And the benefit of practice is that you can catch yourself doing that and say, "Wow, I haven't known what I've been doing. I haven't been mindful for the past week or the past month." And it's never too late. It's just starting again right in this moment.

One thing about these factors is that as you practice, if you know the list, you can take a look and see where you're out of balance. A lot of times when people come into an interview on retreat, I'll be looking at the factors in this way and seeing, "Oh, there's a lot of energy but not much calm." So that'll be the direction. Or somebody else might be very calm but low energy, and I'll look at that. Or somebody else might have not much equanimity, and that's the place to focus on. Or somebody might be doing the practice and it seems like they're really there, but there's very little investigation or joy.

You can look in yourself and see, "Ah, maybe I need a little bit more joy"—not only in your formal meditation, but in your daily life. Probably most of us could use a little bit more joy. It's not cheating. It's bringing some uplifting and nourishment into your heart so you can then be here more for your life. That's not to pretend that everything is okay, but to nourish yourself. Or maybe you need a little bit more investigation. What really is going on? Because it takes courage to investigate.

So you can use these factors. And the amazing thing about them is that you can consciously evoke them, just by having the intention. "Let's cultivate more investigation." You can pretend to be interested, and that gets the ball rolling. "Well, what would it be like if I was interested, even though I'm not? Well, if I was interested, then I'd look more carefully." And then all of a sudden, that starts it. With all of these, you can consciously cultivate them, evoke them.

So maybe play around with them this week. If you happen to hear one in that list and say, "Oh, that's one I could really use a bit more," just take it on as a practice this week. Nobody's giving you a grade, but just see what it's like to consciously bring it more into your meditation or your attitude in your life.

Let your heart be at ease. Breathe in kindness and goodness, letting it fill your whole body, and then breathe it out.

Send some kind thoughts to yourself: May I have happiness in my life. Just getting in touch with that intention. May I have peace in my life. May I express my love well. May I be happy.

And then share that thought with everyone here and with all beings everywhere. As I want happiness for myself, may all beings be happy. As I want peace, may all beings have peace in their lives. As I want love, may all beings grow in love and kindness and express their love well.

May all beings everywhere be happy.

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