The Seven Factors of Awakening - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:45

Last week I introduced the topic of the seven factors of awakening and talked about the first four factors. Mindfulness gets everything else rolling and then keeps the factors in balance. Then come the first three awakening factors of investigation, energy, and rapture—that joyful interest in meditation. We talked about how these three together work to bring up the interest and the energy, and how that creates a kind of joy in the mind that's focused on the meditation object. This joyful quality then starts to settle the mind because the presence of joy itself is satisfying.

This week I want to talk about the final three factors, which are the tranquilizing factors of tranquility, concentration and equanimity. To introduce this phase of the awakening factors and set the stage, I was thinking as I walked up the path tonight of a time at Spirit Rock before the meditation hall was built and before we had the paved road. If you can imagine back to that setting, you'll see that this slope of hill around the meditation hall and up to the site creates a kind of natural amphitheater. In fact, there was no landscaping then. The little bulge to the right of the road as you come up wasn't there either. It was just a smooth contour from here down to the residence halls and then sloping down the hill to the stream.

The dining hall was already there. With this natural amphitheater, once every couple of years we invited Thich Nhat Hanh to come and teach here. We built a platform, a raised wooden platform for him on the other side of the stream. He would sit there, his voice was amplified, and we had a thousand or more people spread out on the hillside listening to him. It reminded me of what it would have been like in the time of the Buddha, when the Buddha is said to have addressed five hundred or more people at a time. Even without amplification, somehow he was able to do it.

Thich Nhat Hanh, more than most teachers that I know, has the ability to manifest this quality of tranquility and calm—and not only manifest it, but radiate it. There's something about his body language and his deep inner stillness and the place that he speaks from. I felt like the whole day that he was talking, he was casting a spell of tranquility over the whole hillside. Everybody over the course of the day just calmed down and settled into the space that he created.

Toward the end of the day, it was very sweet—he took the whole group for a slow walking meditation up the dirt road to the very end of the path. If you've walked back to the end, you know there are a couple of lovely little meadows back there where one day we hope to build a hermitage with about twenty retreat cabins. But for now it's undeveloped. We have a photo of five hundred or so people walking in single file behind him as he did slow walking up to the other end of the property. It was very beautiful. The whole thing unfolded in this space of tranquility and stillness.

As I tuned into him that day and reflected on the incredibly difficult and violent years that he'd lived through during the Vietnam War, where both sides of the war made death threats against him—which is why he had to leave Vietnam—it struck me that his stillness came from somebody who was no longer afraid of dying. He had faced death in all its manifestations so many times that he'd lost his fear of death. And that's why he was so completely at peace in himself.

This transmission of peace and settledness is one of the great blessings of our path. When you meet a master like Thay, you can see it, you can feel it, and how it manifests in his life—his mind, his speech and his body. It's really quite a transmission.

This is the part of the path that I want to explore tonight in these facets of calm, concentration and equanimity. But first, just a little more about the general role of tranquility in the Buddhist path.

The Buddha talked about the practice of mindfulness leading to two main developments. One he called samatha or serenity, the other he called vipassana or insight. Now we've named this an insight meditation practice, an insight meditation center. So we seem to emphasize the vipassana aspect. And I think it is more important because it's only wisdom or insight that has the potential to liberate the mind. It's only the direct seeing of the nature of reality that can really truly free the heart and mind. So insight is supreme in the teachings of the Buddha.

But this factor of samatha is nearly as powerful. The translation is serenity. It could equally well be called tranquility—we just give it a different word to differentiate it from the other terms. This development of samatha is what allows the mind to relax and settle into what has been talked about during this retreat as its natural peace and ease. The mind and body find their own natural peace and ease, which is their very nature when we don't go disturbing it or stirring it up.

It's the opening to serenity, the discovering of this property that lets us settle into that faculty, which is already potential within ourselves. This is not something new we have to construct. It's already our birthright. We just have to open to it and sort of find the way in.

When we find this ability to rest in this peace, this becomes the doorway to contentment. As we rest and there's a satisfying quality in that, we can let go of a lot of the desires to be elsewhere. A lot of the cravings and wantings can fall away as we find a natural satisfaction in this resting in peace.

The enlightened teacher looked at his student and said, "So that's why the Buddha said that samatha is for the abandoning of lust." This is a profound statement because the desire force is considered such a formidable hindrance on the spiritual path. Samatha enables the abandoning of lust precisely because we discover in this peace a profound contentment and settledness—a natural satisfaction that allows our cravings to fall away.

Vipassana, meanwhile, is for the abandoning of ignorance. Only the wisdom that penetrates the ultimate nature of reality can remove ignorance and truly liberate the mind to its fullest potential, uprooting the

deepest bonds that hold us captive. Yet these two work together harmoniously—samatha and vipassana, serenity and insight, like two wings of the same bird.

This evening we'll explore the qualities that comprise this serenity, examining how they develop and how we can skillfully support their cultivation.

The first of the pacifying factors is commonly translated as tranquility, sometimes as calm. The Pali word is passaddhi. Other synonyms might include repose, rest, or as one translator beautifully rendered it, relaxation. I find this particularly appealing—the notion that relaxation itself may be one of the factors of awakening. This is precisely why we place it so centrally in our meditation instructions.

This factor of tranquility represents a state where the body has become calm, free from strong energy movements that might disturb its natural equilibrium. The mind, too, has found its peace—no longer churning with the rapid succession of thoughts and emotions that typically stir up our mental processes.

Picture the surface of a pond when no strong wind disturbs it and no currents bubble up from below. That serene, undisturbed surface—the very absence of movement—points to what we mean by this first factor of calm or tranquility.

I trust that everyone here has touched these awakening factors to varying degrees in your practice. When you encounter this feeling of calm, what is your experience? What affect does it carry? What mood does it evoke? Is it difficult to bear?

There's usually something pleasant about it, isn't there? When the mental chatter subsides and those turbulent energies that shake the body finally settle, a pleasant feeling tone often accompanies the experience. It frequently carries a sense of wellbeing, a quality of rightness.

When I first discovered this state in practice, there was an unmistakable recognition: "Ah, this is what I've been seeking—at least part of what I've been seeking." In our busy Western culture, we receive few pointers toward this state and even less instruction on how to access it. As active Westerners, we often live in perpetual motion—active, active, active, stirred up, stirred up, stirred up. You can feel how exhausting this becomes for both mind and body when we lack knowledge of where to find genuine rest.

Suzuki Roshi observed when teaching at Zen Center in the late seventies: "You know how to rest physically, but you don't know how to rest mentally." The mind grows weary from this constant activity. When we finally touch this factor of tranquility or calm, we begin to feel: "Oh, now I can truly rest." It brings profound soothing to the mind.

Yet because this represents new territory for many of us, it can feel unfamiliar at first. I remember a meditator friend who, upon first encountering this experience while noting her mind states, found herself thinking: "Calm?" As if to say, "What is this? I've heard about it, but I don't recognize this experience. Can this be real?" We must gradually become acquainted with it, learning to recognize its subtle presence.

Because tranquility is such a delicate state, it doesn't announce itself with fanfare. No neon sign flashes "CALM HAS ARRIVED—THE AWAKENING FACTOR IS HERE—PAY ATTENTION!" It's far more subtle than that.

We might not notice it initially and thus overlook it entirely. When it goes unrecognized—when it's not mindfully noted or properly acknowledged—several reactions commonly arise. We might think, "Oh, now nothing's happening. The lights have gone out." When there were fireworks of emotion or cascades of thought, that seemed fascinating. But now that the excitement has subsided, we assume nothing significant is occurring and slip into boredom, wondering when the next stimulating event will awaken our interest.

This reminds me of another of those wonderful cartoons by Gahan Wilson set in a meditation hall...

I think Sally and Sylvia both mentioned. And in this one, there are two monks sitting next to each other. One's clearly older, one's clearly younger. The older monk is leaning over to the young monk and whispering in his ear, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

So sometimes that might be how it feels when we first touch calm. Oh my God, nothing happens next. This is it. Especially if we're used to a lot of storm and fireworks in our practice, either lovely or difficult, then this can seem really uninteresting. And a reaction can be boredom.

But this itself is a clue. When boredom comes, let this be an invitation to investigate what's up. I tend to think of boredom as a reaction that's formed to a neutral feeling tone. So take a look at your experience when boredom has set in. See if there isn't something neutral in the experience that you're having at that moment. This is the feeling tone that tends to be the condition for boredom to come. And then I think of it as an aversion to the neutral, because in some ways we want the drama of pleasant or unpleasant.

But this neutral is a very interesting place to investigate. If it's neutral, that means there's not anything particularly painful going on. That itself is a good development in meditation. Oh, there's the absence of pain. I can appreciate that. Having encountered a lot of pain, I can appreciate that. So take a look at that and then notice if there is a sense of calm in that neutrality and then note it. Oh, this is what the mind state of calm is like. And you know, the Buddha spoke rather highly of this mind state. So there might be something to it.

So take a look at the factor of calm, the sense of neutrality, and if there's any aversion to the neutralness of the experience, but realize that this is a place of great potential. In some ways, this is what we have been waiting for. This calm is part of the fruit of meditation that can really enrich our life. We just want to become more familiar with it, more comfortable with it, and then it tends to become pleasant.

There's another reaction to calm that often happens, and that is we can feel quite unsettled by it. Because calm has a sense of spaciousness that can feel kind of empty to us. When there's a lot of movement, either pleasant or unpleasant, then there's a lot of activity and the I can relate to that. We know what to do with

activity. We sort of know how to find ourself or define ourself in relation to mental activity. But when that mental activity stops and there's space or silence or nothing, then where are we?

So we might get a feeling: I don't know how to find myself in relation to this much space, this much emptiness. And that can be scary. Not knowing where we are in that experience can be unsettling. So sometimes what happens as soon as calm is really opened up and discovered is that there's some degree of fear or anxiety that comes in. So just be open to that. If that's the next thing that arises, you might be noting calm for a few moments, and then you might note anxiety. That's okay. Then just be with that. Let the experience unfold however it does. But start to notice this presence of calm. As we meditate more, it comes more often, is more available.

The Buddha said, in the Dhammapada, "Peace is the highest happiness." This, I think, is a really interesting thing to reflect on. Peace is the highest happiness. To see if we believe this or not. Because I think when we come into meditation, we often are looking for something other than peace. There's a wanting for, or a belief that the highest happiness is a really strong, uplifting experience of bliss, or a great hit of ecstasy, something strongly energizing and moving. And here's the Buddha coming in and saying—who has explored the mind over and over and over again—saying the highest happiness is peace.

What if that's true? Then we might be looking in the wrong places for our ultimate contentment. I think this is a really interesting comment on human psychology and something that's worth pondering. What if the thing that is really going to satisfy us is peace and not any kind of fireworks?

Would that reorient your sense of seeking or aim in life?

This quality of calm can also be developed somewhat. It can be invited. In the Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing, the Buddha says at a few different points, "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe in tranquilizing the mental formation. I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe out tranquilizing the mental formation."

This is really a meditation instruction. See if this is possible. As you're breathing in and out, if you turn your mind to calm, see if the breath has that capability of bringing calmness into the body and mind. You can just play with this in any sitting. As you tune to the breath, connect it in your thoughts with the factor of calm and see if it has the capability to bring that alive somewhat.

So as this quality of calm comes in more, we trust in it more, we relax in it, we just settle our being in it, then it deepens into the next factor, which is concentration. The Pali term is *samadhi.*

Concentration grows out of this collectedness of mind that has come about through the mind's settling in rest or repose. This factor has been in human culture for a long time. It's one of the most powerful qualities in mind, and it's been known since ancient, prehistoric times. Shamans in indigenous cultures all over the world have used this factor to enter the altered states that they enter, to contact other realms, to do the kind of magical healing things that they do. It rests on the power of concentration.

Before the Buddha's awakening, the first two teachers that he went to taught him how to enter deep states of concentration. And in a very short period of time, he reached the same level of attainment that his teachers had. They invited him to teach, but he felt it wasn't the final release he was looking for, so he left those teachers. But those technologies were already in place early in the Buddha's lifetime.

Even today in the West, some aspect of this power is alive in our culture. It's quite interesting to discover this. You can find it in cartoons. You know if it's in cartoons, it's in the common consciousness.

There are two types of guru cartoons that you'll see. The first is a wisdom type. It's the cartoon of the seeker who goes and meets the wise person on the mountaintop and gets all their questions answered. Here is one cartoon that was in the New Yorker. The picture shows somewhere that looks like the Himalayas because there are really tall mountain peaks in the background. There's a cave on one of these mountains, and in front of the cave is a man with a long white beard, sitting cross-legged, wearing just a white loincloth. There's a figure in Western clothes who looks like he has just climbed up the peak to sit in front of the guru and pose his question. The guru's reply: "If I knew the meaning of life, do you think I'd be sitting in this cave in my underpants?"

So I guess that's the wisdom aspect. But the other aspect is the yogi, the yogi who is deep in concentration. There's this archetypal image of the meditator. Think about a person on a mountaintop, seated cross-legged, wrapped in a shawl, eyes closed, not much expression, and what that image evokes. Of course, for you who've been involved in this, you know it from the inside. You get that feeling when you walk into the hall and people have already started to sit. You can feel that presence and groundedness.

I think there are three qualities in this image that I want to draw out. They're aspects of concentration.

The first is stillness. The person is sitting unmoving. There's the implication that as the body has come into stillness, the person's mind has also come into stillness. This is that quality that Thich Nhat Hanh was radiating.

The second quality is that it's an inner experience. There's a sense the person has closed their eyes and somewhat withdrawn from contact with the world. One has turned away from outer engagement and looked inwardly at the mind's own qualities and found rest and stillness inside. This is important because the Buddha talked often about the importance of seclusion, not only seclusion from the outer world, but seclusion from the inner forces of distraction.

The third feature that I think we carry with that archetype is that there's a sense with this inward looking of some deep happiness or contentment or bliss. The yogi in turning away from the world and going inside has found a more meaningful or more lasting or more significant kind of happiness than is available outside.

All these qualities are aspects of concentration. In the Buddha's teachings, it's hard to overstate how important this factor is. It's the last factor in the Eightfold Path, and because the Eightfold Path is

presented as a sequence, it's the culmination before it wraps back around to begin with wisdom again.

When the Buddha summarized the Eightfold Path, he spoke of it as sīla, samādhi, and paññā—ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom. He didn't speak of it as ethical conduct, mindfulness, and wisdom. This is quite interesting. Why is the meditation portion represented by samādhi rather than sati, mindfulness? Because in many ways, samādhi is the culmination of mindfulness. It's the fruition of mindfulness.

Concentration appears in what are called the Iddhipāda, the four bases for progress in spiritual life. It's part of each one of these foundations. It's also found in the five spiritual faculties and in the seven factors of awakening. So it appears again and again in the Buddha's teaching, and I think we have somewhat underrepresented it in Western teaching.

So what is this quality? The word samādhi is usually translated as concentration. It's not a very good translation. I'm going to stay with it because it is so common, but it's a little misleading for us. The fact is, as far as I can tell, there's no single word in English that really conveys the whole meaning of concentration. And that in itself is interesting.

What does it say when a whole culture—and I'd say this is true in any European language—doesn't have a word for something? It generally says we don't know what it is. We don't know how to perceive it or we don't know how to develop it. You know how the Eskimos are said to have seventeen words for snow? Because they've looked at it really closely. And the cultures that have looked at the mind really closely have words for this. You'll find it in most of the Asian languages.

So in English we don't really know what it is, and it took me a long time in practice to understand how concentration is different from mindfulness. I'll talk a little about that tonight.

We usually think in English that the word concentration means I have an exclusive focus of attention on something. Like we say, "I'm concentrating on my homework—can you please turn off the television because it's distracting me?" So we mean my attention is just on one thing. But the term samādhi doesn't have anything to do with attention being just on one thing. What it means is that the mind's substance has gotten collected. The mind's substance has gotten unified or pulled together.

So the best translation that I like for samādhi is "unification of mind." This appears once in the Majjhima Nikāya that I know of—unification of mind. Other synonyms that I think we've been using often are collectedness, composure, non-distractedness, wholeheartedness. So I hope you get the sense that all of these are pointing to how the mind's energy has come together, and in that coming together, it takes on a certain kind of strength.

Normally, what do we do with the mind's energy? We send it into past, we send it into future, we send it into plans, we send it into memories. All these stray random thoughts are taking our energy and just dispersing it, tossing it out to the four winds, and that's how we lose it. When we stop doing that and we let

this quality of resting happen, all the mind's energy comes together. And then we find the mind has a tremendous power.

The concentrated mind is at the base of spiritual power because of the strength that builds up as we pull those energies back in. And I want to emphasize this quality of rest. It's not so much that we have to effort, effort, effort to collect this energy. We just have to non-distract ourselves, and the energy will collect by itself. So the quality of resting will bring this energy together. It's not that you have to effort really hard. In fact, efforting too hard will disturb this natural peace. There just has to be enough effort to stay in touch with the present moment and not become distracted.

So this energy will naturally collect within us. Basically, it's just our attention to the present moment and our not turning away from that which allows this energy to become collected and for the mind to become whole again.

Now, there are two ways that this collectedness can be cultivated. One is through the very open attention where we're in touch with changing appearances moment after moment. This is called momentary concentration, and it's represented in that kind of open attention meditation that we did the other morning. As long as the mindfulness is there moment after moment, that is enough to draw the attention in.

Another way that it can be developed is to pick one steady focus, like the breath, and keep returning the attention there again and again. You could feel it in the abdomen, you could feel it in the chest, you could feel it in the nose. Or the metta phrases are another example of a single-pointed focus. So this collectedness can happen around a single focus, but it doesn't have to. That's not the only way it can develop.

At this point in the retreat, I would invite each of you to reflect and maybe discuss with your teachers: what's the best way in my practice for this sense of collectedness and unification to develop? For me, is it most harmonious to develop through a kind of open attention to anything that comes, but a real commitment to being there moment after moment? Or is there a place in my practice for choosing a single focus at times and being with that—just returning the attention to breath, sounds, body, metta—as a way to bring that collectedness together?

Both can work. It's something of an individual suitability question. What harmonizes best for you?

So start to notice when this factor is present. This is one of the instructions in the Third Foundation in the Satipatthana Sutta. The Buddha says, "The practitioner understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind." The instruction is that we should know whether the factor of concentration is present or not. So just start to explore and look at that.

How do we know when concentration is present? The simplest way is that we're able to sustain mindfulness moment after moment continuously for a while. This is how it feels differently. When you

can be in the present moment, moment after moment, and that goes on for a while, that's a sign of developing concentration. You probably remember the first days of the retreat—you were lucky to catch two breaths in a row. Now maybe you can catch five. That's progress. That's the sign of concentration. That's not the definition of concentration. The definition is the mind comes together and it has a kind of strength. But that's the symptom. That's how you can tell when it's happening.

Concentration is basically generated just by being fully present for each moment of experience. You could say doing one thing at a time. So in your work meditation, to the extent that you can just do your work meditation and be present—say for the movement of your arms and hands—then your attention will collect in doing your work. Really take it as an opportunity through your work period to use it as a meditation practice, and you can continue to develop this factor of unification or collectedness.

When you're walking from here to your room, be in touch with some clear activity—movement of the body, for instance—and that will continue to collect even though it seems like an informal period.

The Zen teacher Seung Sahn used to instruct his students like this. He'd say, "When you sit, just sit. And when you walk, just walk. Just do one thing at a time." So one morning, a student who was living in the Zen center at Providence came into the dining room and found Seung Sahn eating his breakfast and reading a newspaper. The student was very upset and said, "But teacher, you said just do one thing at a time, and here you are eating your breakfast and reading a newspaper." And Seung Sahn replied, "And when you eat and read, just eat and read."

So we don't have to do anything different to cultivate this collectedness. Just be wholehearted in the way you do it. In each moment, just give yourself to that moment.

Now, sometimes you'll feel this factor quite strongly and then it'll go away. How does that feel? Yeah, it's disappointing. That's one of the hard things in meditating—when the concentration factor has been here and goes. So then watch what happens. Often there's a strong desire to be back there. Sometimes that's unconscious. But if we don't catch it and see the wanting, then it drives us. Often we don't see it and we don't notice: oh, craving.

We're basically craving for a pleasurable state, but we don't see it. So we start efforting strongly, hardly, as much effort as we can put in trying to get back to that concentrated state. But when we effort with that kind of striving mentality, that kind of craving underneath, it doesn't work so well. And it ends up tying us in some kind of knot. We get caught up in a lot of tension of desire.

So if you can notice this strong desire, oh, I really want the concentration back, then you can avoid that extra striving kind of effort. Because concentration has to come out of relaxation. It has to come out, it grows out of a real acceptance of the present moment. Not a striving to be somewhere else, but a settling into here.

One of my favorite meditation instructions is one that Joseph Goldstein has been using for thirty-some

years now, when he says, "Just settle back into the present moment." I love to remember that as I'm sitting, just settle back into the present moment. And it has this sense of drawing me from an outward reaching kind of future-oriented grab to just relaxing into the body and settling into the base of the sitting posture.

Because it said in the texts that the proximate cause for concentration is happiness. When happiness is present in the mind, then that settling takes place easily. So striving or craving are the opposite of happiness, and they'll block concentration from being able to happen. But happiness and relaxation will let that settling happen quite naturally.

Some people, it turns out, have a real faculty for concentration, and some people don't. Ajahn Jumnian is one of the teachers who comes here about once a year. He's a Thai meditation master. He's now in his late sixties. When he was a boy of four and a half, his father, who was an ex-monk, decided he should learn meditation. So at four and a half, his father made him sit down on the floor of their cottage in southern Thailand. They lived in the countryside.

And he told the young boy to repeat the term "Buddho"—it can be used as a mantra. So Ajahn Jumnian, or back then, Little Jumnian, would just repeat "Buddho, Buddho, Buddho," but he really wasn't into meditation. Imagine when you were four years old, if your parents had told you you had to meditate, that'd be the last thing you'd want to do. So he'd be sitting there, but his fantasy, his mind would be with flying his kite out in the fields. And so he'd be wandering off in his imagination.

And his father then would actually read his mind because his father had been a monk of some accomplishment and would say, "Jumnian, let go of that kite fantasy or I'm going to whack you upside the head." And so Jumnian would have to just focus again or he knew his father would be on him.

So something about that intense kind of training worked. Because at age four and a half, Ajahn Jumnian was sitting there doing his "Buddho, Buddho, Buddho," and he went into a deep absorption state. A deep state of concentration where the mind kind of shifts into another gear and gets enclosed within itself. His parents couldn't reach him. They'd talk to him and say, "Are you okay? Come out, come back, what's going on?" But he wouldn't come out. He just stayed in his absorption.

And his father, because of his training, understood where his mind had gone, but no matter how much they asked him to come out, he just stayed in his meditative state. And they got quite worried. You can imagine how you would feel as a parent if your four-and-a-half-year-old just went away on you.

So finally his mother, whom he loved very much, was a very kind and loving person, entreated him over and over, "Please come back to us. We'll have a very nice meal when you come back. I'll cook your favorite dinner if you come out." And so he did eventually come out.

But they recognized at that point they had a meditation prodigy on their hands. So from that age, very young age, he was trained both by a village monk, as his father turned him over for training to another monk, and by the local shaman. So Ajahn Jumnian has both traditional Buddhist training and also

shamanic training because of his concentration. So he was quite a prodigy recognized at an early age.

I, on the other hand, was not. And when I came into meditation practice, concentration was really my weak suit. And I would look at some of my friends, and we'd compare stories after retreats. "I was in the first jhana in this retreat." I opened my eyes in one retreat. I looked at a friend of mine, and she was just kind of... And I could tell she was just in some deep bliss and surrender state. And here I am dealing with tension in my chest and pain in my knees, and I was not there.

So it comes to some of us, and it doesn't come so easily for others. But although concentration was not so available, insight was more available to me.

And so over the years, I put some effort in and strengthened the factor of concentration, and it has gotten better for me. But be aware that if concentration isn't your strong suit, it's not the end-all and be-all. Wisdom can operate whether or not there's strong concentration. You can use ordinary life, unconcentrated retreat experience, and if you reach it, concentrated retreat experience to develop the faculty of wisdom. Whether concentration is present or not does not stop the development of insight and understanding on our path.

If you're able to develop this quality of concentration, I recommend it because as the path develops, it gives us a strong foundation of stability of mind so that we can see clearly with some depth to develop wisdom. It also gives a sense of well-being and ease in life.

The Dalai Lama said: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." This factor of samadhi is an important part of the quality of inner peace.

As this factor develops, it develops into these qualities called jhanas. On the road to jhanas we reach states where the mind is so collected and so unified in the present moment that the five hindrances can no longer arise in that state. This is described in the text as something called access concentration, meaning that the access to the jhana state is close.

Finding this experience in meditation where the five hindrances are not arising is to discover a place where the mind is not swayed at all by the forces of wanting and disliking and restlessness and doubt and dullness. The Buddha said that it's really quite extraordinary. He said when these five hindrances have been abandoned, one sees that as freedom from debt, like health after a long illness, like release from prison or freedom from slavery and a land of safety. He talked about this state of concentration as being a liberation of mind—only temporary, but a liberation of mind because the hindrances are no longer arising.

Part of what happens as the mind becomes collected in this way is that it achieves a stability and a strength so that you can feel unmoved by the comings and goings of the changing conditions of comfortable and uncomfortable experiences in life. This is one of the most notable things that happens as

you're sitting. Things keep happening, pleasure and pain keep arising, but the mind is no longer so moved by them. We're not thrown all over the place by the changing conditions.

This strength of concentration is what gives rise to the final factor of awakening called equanimity. Equanimity is this balance of mind that comes out of a sense of strength—not out of indifference—that can feel all the changing conditions in our experience but is not caught up in greed and aversion in reaction to them. There's enough confidence and support in the mind that we can experience a certain amount of pleasure and not crave for more. We can experience a certain amount of pain and not need to push it away. The mind has the strength and the spaciousness to hold it.

Above all, it feels like the mind has achieved a kind of balance within the changing field of appearances—to be on an even keel, an even temper, even as the phenomena keep changing. You can take a look at this. When your mind is concentrated, observe things that were formerly drawing you with their pleasure or things that were repelling you with their unpleasant quality, and see if the mind is still as moved by them. You're not out of touch. You still feel them clearly and distinctly, but you're not caught up and thrown around by them.

This also becomes a great support in daily life. This is part of that inner peace that the Dalai Lama was talking about.

The term equanimity sometimes has a connotation in our culture of being—what in the Brahmaviharas is called its near enemy—indifferent. Sometimes we get the sense that in equanimity there's no feeling, there's no heart, there's no love, there's no compassion. But that's not the way the experience of it feels. Rather, there's a balance of mind and a strength and a confidence so that all the emotions can go through us and we're not so shaken up by them.

That confidence itself gives more room for the other three Brahmaviharas to come through and be felt and expressed. The qualities of metta, compassion, and joy are supported by the equanimity. They're not turned off by it, they're not dampened by it, they're not dulled by it, but rather this inner confidence gives them the freedom to start to move through more strongly.

We had a discussion group at the end of the last three-month course at IMS. I was asking people to share some of their experiences from having sat the six weeks or the three months. A lot of what people shared about was this growing spaciousness of mind that let them feel into their family relationships at home, feel into the bodily aches and pains that came during the long sits, feel into the difficult states of mind—fear, anxiety, worry, planning, or wanting that visited them. What they reported was that all these things happened and those experiences just weren't burdensome in the same way that they had been previously. They didn't suffer around them in the same way. They associated with this spaciousness the word equanimity.

I said, "I want to ask you something. Is this a flat or dull or turned off place?" And they said, "Absolutely

not. My heart is more open, more alive. There's more warmth and more connectedness than before."

So don't think of this as a dull place because of this term.

It's not like the emotions get turned off, but it's an unburdened place where the beautiful qualities can come through more easily.

This factor of equanimity appears throughout the Buddha's teachings. It's included in the list of the paramis, the qualities we develop for liberation. It's also found in the Brahmaviharas—the fourth one, which we'll practice later in this retreat. The Visuddhimagga, the sixth-century commentary, outlines a very detailed "progress of insight" leading to awakening, showing step by step how the process often unfolds as meditators advance. In this progression, equanimity is the stage that comes just before awakening. And of course, it's one of the factors of awakening itself, which we're exploring tonight.

In all these lists—paramis, brahmaviharas, progress of insight, factors of awakening—equanimity is mentioned last. These are all sequential progressions. What the Buddha's teachings are essentially saying is that equanimity is considered the worldly state closest in nature to the unconditioned, to nibbana, to awakening. It's not possible to describe a worldly state of mind more similar to the deathless than this factor of equanimity. It's considered the highest of the conventional states that can be developed.

At one point, the Buddha said, "Clinging to equanimity is the highest kind of clinging, but it's still clinging, and you need to let go even of that."

So this is the complete list of the seven factors: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. For the mind to come into its fullness, these factors need to be brought up together and balanced.

Let me talk about how, in a practical way, to do that balancing. First of all, mindfulness starts the rolling, and all the other factors arise from that. So you don't need to do any different practice to start these factors going. Mindfulness will engage them, and they all follow. Mindfulness is also the balancer.

As you're practicing, begin to notice when the energizing factors are high and what that feels like, and then when the tranquilizing factors are strong and what that feels like. I find it simpler in the beginning to keep monitoring three factors in particular, and I do this in my practice almost continuously.

I try to keep an eye on: Where's my mindfulness? That is, am I present? Am I knowing what's happening? Where's my energy? I use energy to stand in for the three arousing factors. And where's my concentration? I use concentration to stand in for the three pacifying factors.

So if my teacher came along and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Guy, right now, where's your mindfulness, energy, and concentration?" I would hope I'd be able to say, "They're like this." And they can all be different.

Think about a time when energy is high, but concentration and the pacifying factors are low. What's that experience like? Someone said restless? Yes. This is the quality of restlessness. There's too much activity, not enough pacification. There's a lot of energy—we're really up—but maybe there are many thoughts, a lot of movement in the body. Emotions may be flashing through, and there's not a sense of rest. There's a restless quality. That's the feeling when the energy factors are high, but the calming factors are not.

What about when the energy factors are low and the calming factors are high? What's that like? Dullness, sleepiness, sloth and torpor. In the beginning of the retreat, this was common and you really felt the sloth and torpor. What's interesting is it returns later on in the retreat in a slightly different form that we call "sinking mind."

Your mindfulness is much stronger now. Let me give an example, and you can see if this has happened for you. You might be very mindful, very present and connecting with the breath, breath after breath after breath.

So mindfulness is present. Concentration is good. There's enough wakefulness—you're really with it. But as you're connecting with the breath, all of a sudden the breath feels so soothing, like Brahms' lullaby. You're just getting so soothed by the breath that you start drifting off, moving into a kind of hazy, dull, very pleasant fog.

This is not strictly sloth and torpor. It's more what we call sinking mind. Mindfulness is strong, but here you see clearly how the energies of calm have gotten a little too strong for the amount of energy present to meet them, and consciousness has toppled over into this state of dullness or fogginess. It's not exactly a hindrance, but rather an energy imbalance.

When you notice that the energizing factors are too high, you want to bring in more of the pacifying factors. One of the best ways to do this is to think about whatever helps you relax—let relaxation be your way in. Another useful approach is reflection on space, making the attention very broad. Sounds can help bring in that sense of wideness and relaxation. You can use the breath with the intention of breathing in, tranquilizing the bodily formation; breathing out, tranquilizing the mental formation. See if the breath with that intention can help bring in a sense of calm.

Also, when energy is high and thoughts are very active, don't put too much energy into investigating that state. Part of our cultural conditioning as Westerners is that we're really good at investigating. Generally, as a culture, we do a lot of investigation. When we come to meditation, we tend to be a little overactive in investigation. So when things are already active, don't heighten the energizing factors. Investigate a little less and just tune into resting in that, even if it's resting in a little bit of turmoil.

When the calming factors are too high and the experience is one of dullness or fog, you want to find a way to bring in energy. Obviously you can bring it in through the physical response to the hindrance of sloth and torpor—open the eyes, stand up, take a brisk walk, splash some water on your face. In bringing up the

physical energy, you'll bring up the virya overall.

But there are other ways to work with it. If it's not quite sloth and torpor but more just dullness of mind, you can pick it up through the meditation itself. You basically want to energize the investigative faculty—that's the way to come in. Get more interest. Explore your experience in more detail. Find something to ask questions about. Bring some vividness to your exploration.

Another way I find really helpful to pick up energy out of dullness is to turn to noting and do it really steadily. Turn on this regular noting practice: in-breath, out-breath, sound, sensation, thought, mood, hearing, and so on. That will wake up the perceiving quality. It will wake up mindfulness, and mindfulness will wake up the energy. It's a nice way to investigate—it will brighten the mind and bring that energy in.

When the factors are brought up together and they're all in balance, you get this beautiful quality of a mind that is poised and still, but also really alert and interested. Everything is alive and vivid and clear, yet it's being experienced with a great deal of peace and stability of mind. This is the mind that is ripe for insight. This is the kind of mind that is getting tuned closer and closer to the factor of the unconditioned.

As that attunement gets strengthened and heightened, at some point it may get so tuned that the mind just tips over into that unconditioned place—tips over and opens to nibbana, the unconditioned, or the deathless.

Let me close with this quotation from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, these seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering."

So let's just sit for a minute together.

So this beautiful teaching concludes with the Buddha's own words about these seven factors of awakening. When we develop and cultivate them, they lead us to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering.

This is what we're working toward—not just momentary states of calm or clarity, but the fundamental transformation that comes from understanding the deepest truths of our experience. The seven factors of awakening are our pathway there, our companions on the journey toward complete freedom from suffering.

Each time we notice mindfulness arising, each time we cultivate investigation or energy, each time we touch joy or tranquility, each time we deepen our concentration or rest in equanimity, we're moving closer to this ultimate goal. We're training the mind in the very qualities that the Buddha identified as essential for awakening.

And perhaps most beautifully, these factors don't require us to become someone else or to transcend our human experience entirely. They ask us to work skillfully with what's already here—with our capacity for awareness, our natural curiosity, our innate potential for joy and peace. The path to the unconditioned runs right through the heart of our conditioned experience.

Let us sit now in appreciation for these teachings and in dedication to putting them into practice. May our cultivation of these seven factors of awakening benefit not only ourselves but all beings everywhere. May all beings be free from suffering. May all beings know the peace of nibbana.

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