The Seven Factors of Awakening (Bojjhaṅga)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:27

At this point in the retreat, we've talked quite a bit about the difficult energies that come into the heart and mind—the hindrances, the roots of the unwholesome, working with difficult emotions. Now we're turning a corner in our discourse and are going to start talking more about the beautiful states of mind. Carol talked last night about the quality of loving kindness, which you've been practicing for a few weeks. Tonight I want to talk about another set of beautiful qualities called the seven factors of awakening.

The reason I want to talk about them now is that I'm hearing them a lot in the interviews and the questions. These beautiful qualities, now that you're settled in for three weeks, are really starting to come alive and percolate in you, in everyone that I've talked to, and I think they're there in everyone here. It's very helpful to start to pay attention to them, recognize them, and know how to nurture them.

There's a story from the Native American tradition that was popular right after 9-11. Many of you may have heard it. A story about a young boy who goes to school and has a conflict with a classmate and feels that he's been treated unfairly. He comes back in the evening to his home and talks to his grandfather about it, describing how he feels so angry and wants to get some kind of revenge for what happened at school that day.

The grandfather listens to him and says, "Yes, I know just what you mean. When I think about all the things that have been done, people taking what didn't belong to them and not caring for the people that they injured, I can feel very angry and full of hatred and want to take vengeance on them. It's like there are two wolves inside of me. This one wolf is the angry and quarrelsome and hateful wolf. But there's another wolf inside of me that is patient, wants to be kind to everyone regardless of what they've done and live in harmony with others. These two wolves often battle inside me and each one tries to dominate my spirit and each one tries to come out on top."

So the young boy asked, "Well, grandfather, which one will win?" And the old man said, "The one that I feed."

What I was struck by in this story—it's a very touching story about spiritual life in general—but I was really struck by the language that the old man used because it's very similar to the language that the Buddha used. He talked many times about how the path is all about starving the hindrances and feeding these factors of awakening that we'll be talking about tonight.

So really the question is, in all of our practice, how do we starve or weaken the afflictive forces in the heart and mind, and how do we strengthen and grow and build up the beautiful qualities of heart and

mind? This work is the work of what's called bhāvanā, or mental development.

If you remember, I quoted this French poet, Paul Valéry, who in one of his works, his notebooks, said, "Other people write books, but I am making my mind." In this work of meditation, we are making our minds also, and we can shape them in the direction of these beautiful qualities once we understand how they come about. There are no limits that I know of to the depth of development of these qualities.

A teacher who comes to Spirit Rock often is Ajahn Jumnian, a Thai monk who's now in his 60s and has been coming for probably the past 10 years every year. In one of the conversations with him, Ajahn Jumnian said that he has not had any anger in 25 years. That's a nice mind. That's a mind of some accomplishment. The Buddha talked about how through this development, the mind can really become tamed, brought under some kind of control so that the afflictive forces don't torment us any longer.

Another person who was very impressive in this regard, this degree of development, was an Indian teacher named Dipa Ma. I know many of you have heard of her and there's a wonderful book about her life simply called "Dipa Ma" that many women practitioners resonate strongly with because she was a very strong figure as a woman teacher in our tradition.

I had the chance to spend some time with Dipa Ma in the early 1980s and look after her for a month on her first visit to this country. She was accompanied by her grandson, who was about four years old at that time and was a little bit of a whirlwind. We would take them out shopping in the local mall near Amherst. I remember the young boy, his name was Rishi, running down the aisles of this department store and tugging at clothes, clothes falling off in the aisle, hangers falling down in the aisle, and kind of chaos just following him. Then Dipa Ma running after him—she was probably in her 60s at that point—and her white robes were flapping behind her as she ran down the aisle, but there was always a little smile on her face. She had such great love and patience for her grandson. I thought, if you can be cool shopping in a mall in America, you're a pretty cooled-out yogi. So that was Dipa Ma.

At one point, she helped teach a three-month course here. Some yogis were spending time with her. Everybody was struck by her presence, her quality of stillness and openness. They asked her, "What is in your mind? What's there? What do you feel?" And she replied, "I only have three things in my mind. There's peace, there's concentration, and there's mettā." That was it. And she seemed to abide in that place most of the time.

So the kind of development that is possible is really unlimited. People like Dipa Ma show us some of that potential.

The states that I want to talk about tonight, the seven factors of awakening, are probably the group that the Buddha talked most about when he was describing the unfolding of meditation. As the hindrances are the list of difficulties that meditators frequently encounter, these are the list of wholesome qualities that are directly developed through the meditation practice. So they're ones that it's very helpful for us as

meditators to get to understand.

Really, I would say that these factors become the meditator's best friend. These are the qualities that accompany us on the journey and produce the beautiful outcomes as well as the insights that arise on the path.

So the seven states that are included in this group are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. These are the ones I want to talk about tonight, and the Buddha said they lead to awakening—therefore they're called factors of awakening, which makes sense. He said they're all described as "maturing in release"—that is, when we develop them and bring them to strength, they lead to our release or liberation. That's their destination.

Another quote from the Buddha: "Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, he slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbana"—to the unconditioned, to awakening. So these are the factors that lead in that direction.

They can also be understood as the qualities of a mind that is approaching the moment of awakening or enlightenment. As the mind is filled with these factors and as they come into strength, maturity, and fulfillment, the way that mind is formed is right next door to the unconditioned, right next door to nibbana. You might say it's the closest approximation that can be made to that. So it's as though we're tuning to or imitating this unconditioned nature. And as the mind gets closer and closer in approximation to it, it can then fall in. And that moment of enlightenment or awakening happens because of that proximity.

The Buddha described these factors in a given order because he said one leads to the next, leads to the next. So I'll explain it that way, and I think it's helpful to understand them in that developmental line. But they're also nonlinear in the sense that every one of them supports the others. So it's not really that we have to strictly start at the first and only then go to the second and only then to the third. They grow all along the path.

In the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha describes this as one of the important areas of dhammas or principles that the meditator should understand. And what he says is we should know these seven factors. We should also know what leads them to arise and how to bring them to fulfillment or real strength. So that's pointing to the basic terrain of knowing the factors, but also being open to their arising and being weak in the beginning. But then as the meditation develops, as we learn how to strengthen them, we can grow them up into quite strong forces in the mind.

So again, it's my impression that everyone here has tasted these factors by this point in the retreat to a greater or lesser degree. And in coming to recognize them, they don't have to be built to a very strong level. We can start to get familiar with them just in their first taste. So I want to describe them tonight and

encourage you to begin to tune into them in your practice. I think they're already there, and it's just a matter of looking for them, getting to know them, and then understanding how to develop them further.

The first of the factors in the sequence the Buddha described was mindfulness. Because we've been developing this from the very beginning, it is really the practice of mindfulness that has set the chain going for these other factors. So whether you consciously knew the other factors were developing or not, mindfulness has been the engine that has made them grow already.

The next three factors are what are called "arousing"—they're qualities that tend to pick energy up. The final three are called "calming"—they're factors that tend to settle the energy that's been brought up by the first three. Mindfulness starts the chain going, and then mindfulness is also the factor that balances the energizing and the calming sets of the seven factors.

So overall, what this grouping describes is a group that balances the factor of arousing energy and tranquilizing energy. For instance, when we gave simple instructions in the beginning, pointing to a way of being that was both tranquil and alert, that's an expression of this same balance. So you can see this is a really fundamental place we're aiming in our meditation practice—to find this balance where there's enough energy to be alert, awake, sensitive to each moment as it unfolds and changes, but also relaxed, steady, to some extent still, and able to observe clearly. It's the balance of these qualities that makes the mind ripe for meditation, ripe for insight, ripe for awakening.

So we'll talk about these one by one. Mindfulness we've talked a lot about already. I don't need to say a lot about this factor this evening—you've been doing it hour by hour, day by day, and it's grown quite strongly in everyone that I've seen, and I suspect in everyone who's here.

Sometimes we don't notice it because the growth of mindfulness doesn't mean that the movement of mind stops, but it means that we're much more aware of it when it's happening. One thing that I'm noticing and hearing in the interviews is it's taking less effort to be present than it did at the beginning. This is something you may notice—it's easier, more effortless to be in contact with the present moment. Sometimes it can start to feel like you're not working hard enough, and you may question, "Am I really doing it?" Because in the beginning, it takes a lot of effort to connect with the present, not be swept away by thinking. As the mindfulness has gotten stronger, that becomes a little more natural, a little easier to do.

But you can trust that. When that more effortless quality appears, you can use it as an indicator to relax. Trust that awareness will reveal what you need to see.

When mindfulness is present and we start to look at our experience, we tend to get interested in it. We get curious. We notice a level of detail, a level of activity we haven't seen before, and that leads us to pay closer attention. That leads to the second factor, which is the factor of investigation.

Investigation sounds very conceptual, like we should be raising lots of questions and thinking about it and

reflecting. But in meditation, that's not the meaning of investigation. Investigation really means drawing the attention closer to our experience. So it's not that we have to ask a lot or think a lot or wonder a lot. We just have to connect more directly. You might say feel things more intimately in our experience.

I'll give you a simple example. In experiencing the breath, many people report feeling bored after some time. "Oh, the breath seems so similar. I've been with a hundred breaths in the last hour. It seems like nothing is changing. My attention's drifting off." What do we do? Boredom is often a factor of just not looking for all the richness that is there already. So by looking more closely, we can often refine that interest.

Here are a few simple suggestions for investigation of the breath. Every breath has three parts: a beginning, middle, and end to the in-breath; a beginning, middle, and end to the out-breath. Can you notice those? Try it sometime and see. Can you feel the breath just as it's making itself known? Can you feel that long stretch of the in-breath coming in? Can you feel it fading away? Then how soon do you feel the first touch of an out-breath? Can you be with it through that whole middle portion of exhaling? And then can you feel it fading away to nothing again? If the mindfulness is close to the breath, you'll feel these three parts. Being interested in that will keep your attention there more easily.

Another good way to investigate the breath was an exercise that Sayadaw U Pandita used to assign meditators. His instructions were to follow the breath at the abdomen with the rising and falling. But if you're experiencing it at the nose or the chest, you could also ask the same question. He would mention this in an interview and then ask for a reply later: "Tell me three distinct sensations that you notice in an in-breath. Tell me three distinct sensations you notice in an out-breath."

Often we might think, "Oh, there's just the in-breath." But if we look more closely, we see that in the in-breath, there are lots of little sensations coming and going, coming and going, coming and going over the course of that whole breathing in. Over the course of the out-breath, same thing. Lots of little sensations coming, going, coming, going, coming, going. So he would say, "Tell me three sensations you notice for an in-breath and an out-breath."

When you have to find it and report to a teacher like Sayadaw U Pandita, it brings your interest into the moment. You don't want to walk into the room next day and say, "I couldn't find anything." So you get very motivated. And then if you were successful, he'd say, "Well, next day tell me something new that you haven't told me before." So you'd get motivated all over again.

This kind of investigation really draws on a quality of what you might call careful attention. In the Pali, there's a phrase that the Buddha used over and over again called yoniso manasikāra. Manasikāra means attention. Yoniso is often translated as wise. The Buddha talked about how to apply attention that got us in trouble, how to apply attention that led to growth in meditation. And this word yoniso, which is often translated as wise, actually has a meaning of womb-like, like the womb from which babies come.

So it's beautiful to think about our mindfulness as embodying a womb-like attention, because that has this beautiful image of whatever our object is—breath, sound, sensation, emotion—being embraced with mindfulness. It's being surrounded and held and nurtured.

as it emerges from this womb-like quality of attention. So there's a sense that mindfulness is not some cold, clinical, detached quality of observation, but rather embodies what Carol spoke of last night—a quality of non-hatred, or *adosa* in Pali, leaning toward *metta*. This suggests an attention that is warm, caring, embracing—genuinely friendly in its quality.

You can feel this happening quite naturally when certain things arise. When you smell dessert emerging from the kitchen at lunch, attention moves toward the back table in this truly embracing way, holding and nourishing whatever delicious creation is appearing there.

I was taking a short walk after tea the other evening when I heard a single honk up in the sky. Looking up, I saw a flight of about twenty Canadian geese passing overhead in a beautifully formed V—this was before the rain started. They were flying fairly low, and I could see each one clearly. When that happened, my attention was simply there, effortlessly. I wasn't distracted, didn't want to be anywhere else. Because of that natural interest, attention sustained itself.

When we can cultivate genuine interest in this experience of mind and body, mindfulness arises with remarkable ease. Investigation can truly support this quality of interest.

Consider investigating an emotion as another example. If we can discover genuine interest in it—even when the emotion itself may be difficult—that quality of interest brings in a positive element. We sense that we can learn from this experience, that there's something to be understood here. Wisdom can grow. Our capacity to hold whatever arises can expand. When we bring in this positive element, this positive feeling, there's actually a kind of joy, even in being with difficult emotions.

Notice if sometimes, even when being with primary patterns you find—anxiety, worry, fear, sadness—being present with them and maintaining interest doesn't bring a certain joy to the experience that helps sustain attention with that emotion.

Then, as we remain with the experience out of this interest, we feel not only the immediate characteristics—with breath, we feel all the small sensations coming and going, the flutters, pressure, relaxation, or expansion. With emotion, we sense its particular quality—how joy differs from contentment, differs from anxiety. We feel these particulars, but as we continue staying present, we begin to see some of the universal characteristics.

All those small sensations with breath—coming, going, coming, going—reveal that nothing solid exists there. Everything is constantly changing. Breath demonstrates impermanence beautifully when we look closely. There isn't just one sensation; all sensations arise and pass away continuously.

We can observe impermanence with emotions as well—none of them last. We can begin to investigate how this quality we call fear exists in all of us. The quality we call happiness exists in all of us. It's not "mine" or "yours"—it's part of nature, part of human nature. We start to see beneath this notion of self. It's not about me or you; it's simply part of human nature. We begin to release some of the ownership, some of the "I, me, mine" from that experience.

This understanding emerges naturally from the interest in investigating combined with mindfulness.

Investigation is also powerful because it directly expresses the wisdom nature of our mind. The practice we're engaged in—Insight Meditation—ultimately relies on developing wisdom and understanding. But sometimes it's challenging to know how we cultivate that. Among all the factors available for us to directly strengthen, investigation is one that truly draws out this wisdom element. Investigation expresses "I want to see, I want to understand, I want to know." We're activating that wisdom quality quite directly.

Now, as we become more interested, as we launch this investigation, we move into the third factor—the factor of energy. The Pali word is *viriya*, sometimes translated as energy, sometimes as effort, sometimes as energetic effort—because translators couldn't decide, so they combined them.

And I'll just say a few more words that are sometimes associated to give you a sense of the meaning: strength, courage, ardor, or my current favorite—enthusiasm. For me, virya is about what quality of enthusiasm we bring. This enthusiasm relies on this level of interest and investigation, so it's triggered by those, conditioned by those.

It refers to energy in both body and mind, but it's a specific kind of energy—an energy or enthusiasm that's directed to the path. It's directed to the work that we're doing here. So this is the Buddha's description: "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the responsibility of cultivating wholesome states." There you kind of get a feeling for where the quality of courage comes in. The word vira, that's the root of virya, means hero in Pali. So this quality of virya has a heroic quality about it.

And you all manifest this day by day. I'm touched by this every day in the interviews. We know it's not easy doing the discipline that you're doing—having left your homes, sitting, walking, being present, sitting still moment after moment after moment. It takes a lot of resolve to keep coming back and greeting the present moment. It's not always pleasant, not always easy. So each of you is carrying out a kind of heroic undertaking in your willingness to be here. That's the expression of the courage quality of this nature of virya.

Of course, it comes out of our motivation, our aspiration, and understanding what we need to do to carry out the practice. You can see this in any walk of life—people who want to reach a difficult goal carry out this quality of courageous effort again and again and again.

When I look for analogies to this, I look at the area of professional athletes where it's very clear. My

particular sport addiction is tennis. I like to play and I like to follow it and I like to watch. The level of physical conditioning in the world of tennis has gone way up in the last ten years. So you have people like Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal who are these amazing super guys—they can go out and run around a court for five hours or longer and still look fresh. I mean, you hardly ever see Federer even sweat. Nadal is working hard, but he can do it all day long. They're incredibly well conditioned.

I remember when I was following Andre Agassi, who retired a number of years ago—I read about his training regimen. He had a very tough workout coach who would lead him on runs in the hills around Las Vegas, where Agassi lives. It's a desert, as you probably know, and it gets really hot most of the year. So he would be pushed to sprint up these hills until he got so tired that he was throwing up. And when he reached that point, the trainer said, "Okay, that's enough for today. You can go back down." But that's the extent to which he worked to achieve his goal of conditioning.

Another realm, and this is the one that I'm really most in awe of, are professional bike riders. Every year I like to follow the Tour de France when it happens in July and a little bit into August, because I think those are the most amazing athletes on the face of the planet. They go for most of a month going full out day after day after day. How they get the energy to climb back on the bike the next day and do it again—going up thousands of meters, up these really steep grades, racing other people who are in the best physical shape imaginable—it's just amazing.

I followed Lance Armstrong for a number of years when he won the tour seven times. And he made a comment: "Yeah, I do well in this sport because I have a high tolerance for pain. Basically, when I go out and race, I know that I'm just going to be setting myself up for eight hours of continuous physical pain. That's what happens when I get on a bike." That's a lot of determination. That's a lot of courage. And in the training for that, there's a lot of hours of pain too.

So these people are just going for fame and fortune. We're going for the end of suffering. But actually I think our effort is not inferior to theirs. The effort that you all put in on a course like this is similar to that of world-class athletes.

I remember one three-month course where the style was intensely oriented toward virya. The teachers recommended that we plan to sleep only four hours a night, dedicating the remaining twenty hours to continuous mental noting. I took on that challenge, though it wasn't my normal style—I was accustomed to at least six hours of sleep in retreat.

I thought I might not be able to do it. Initially I managed about six hours, but I held the sincere intention to keep working until I reached the requested four hours. Every day in interviews with Joseph and Sharon, they would ask how many hours I'd slept, so there was no escaping accountability.

After countless sleepy sittings, walkings, and standings, I managed to reduce my sleep to four hours while maintaining awareness and noting practice for the other twenty. It was probably the hardest I've ever

worked in meditation retreat, and I learned tremendously from it. Looking back—fortunately it's looking back now, as I was younger then—I discovered things I don't know if I could have learned any other way. I'm deeply grateful for those demanding teachers and that rigorous style. The lessons were invaluable.

The fruit was extraordinary continuity. That sustained noting across so many hours of wakefulness created the finest moment-to-moment continuity of mindfulness I've ever experienced. That was the true reward.

This represents the courageous side of virya—the extending, going-to-the-limit aspect of this energy. But there's another way to understand virya that doesn't rely so heavily on that courage element: the quality of simply persisting.

Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote in one of his books on the Eightfold Path that only two things are required to reach liberation. One is that you start, and the second is that you continue. He said if you do those two things, the outcome is guaranteed. That's the quality of persistence—just keep going.

This quality appears beautifully in a story from the Tibetan tradition about the great yogi Milarepa, who practiced in the eleventh century. He lived most of his practice career in a cave, very simply, always dressed in just a thin white cloth, sustaining himself through winters by practicing inner heat yoga. He trained great disciples, particularly Gampopa and Raichungpa.

The story tells of Milarepa saying goodbye to Gampopa, who had studied with him extensively, receiving teachings, transmissions, and secret instructions. Now it was time for Gampopa to find his own cave and practice independently. The student, sorry to leave his teacher but knowing it was time, came to say farewell. He bowed, took leave, and started down the path.

Then Milarepa called him back. "There's one more teaching I must give you," he said. "This is really the secret to everything I've achieved through meditation."

To give this teaching, Milarepa turned around, flipped up the hem of his white robe, leaned over, and showed Gampopa his buttocks, which were calloused as hard as a camel's hoof.

"This is really the key to my success," Milarepa said. "Sitting on my backside is what has made my meditation successful. This is the kind of perseverance you need too, Gampopa."

Gampopa took that advice, practiced with great dedication, and became himself a great teacher with many disciples and schools.

Another teacher, the modern Burmese master Sayadaw U Tejaniya, expresses this quality of perseverance beautifully: "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this, you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

Again, just this steadiness of application. It's not hard to be aware—can you feel your seat on the chair right now? That's not difficult. But maintaining awareness moment after moment after moment is challenging. That's what Sayadaw U Tejaniya points to: relaxed effort, but very persistent.

When this kind of energy arises in practice—this interest in what we're doing—the mind becomes alert, bright, and present. This naturally leads to the next factor of the seven: rapture.

"Rapture" is perhaps too strong a translation. When I think of rapture, I imagine someone almost unconscious in ecstasy—that's excessive. A better rendering might be "joyful interest" or "rapt attention." The Pali word is *pīti*, which describes the quality of being bright, alert, energetic, and connected to the present moment. Within that connection—whether with breath, body, sensations, or sounds—you begin to discover happiness.

It's truly a wonderful moment in meditation when you find you actually like your object of attention.

It might be the breath, it might be sounds, but there's a sense in coming into contact with it that it's pleasant to be there. There's a happiness in being with the object itself. In the beginning, it just seems like work. And the object doesn't seem that exciting. It's certainly not delightful. But as this quality of present moment interest and attention grows, it takes on a pleasant quality. Then it becomes easier to stay connected because of the enjoyment of it.

There's a teacher in Australia who lives in Skye's hometown of Perth. A Western monk named Ajahn Brahm teaches extensively on the qualities of the breath for strong concentration. It's his central interest and teaching. The way that he encourages people to make a really close connection with the breath is to see it as beautiful. Because if you can see the breath as beautiful, you'll naturally want to be there. Just like seeing a flock of geese, just like watching a sunset, just like seeing the face of a child.

So finding this quality of delight or joy in relation to the meditation object is the next factor of awakening. It's a mental factor because it comes out of the mind's relationship to the object, but it's said that it expresses itself physically. And it can manifest in varying degrees.

Often when people reach this stage, there's a kind of release or opening to energy in the body. The energy can be experienced, it's said, classically in five different ways. It can be minor—it just feels like there's a kind of trembling on the surface of the skin. It can be momentary, and there's a kind of rush of energy, like a bolt of lightning. There's a showering kind of energy where it feels like waves of energy pass through the body. One wave passes away and later maybe another wave. There's an uplifting kind of energy where the body starts to feel really light. You could sit for a long time on the cushion because there's a lightness to the body, and sometimes you feel you could almost float off the cushion.

It's said that it's this uplifting quality of piti that allows yogis to develop a quality of levitation. Remember those old stories about the Maharishi when he was teaching levitation in Indiana somewhere? I recently met someone who had been on those retreats and she said people actually were kind of bouncing across

the room based on the development of this factor of piti expressing itself through the body lifting. This is also described in the Buddhist texts as well. And the fifth kind of rapture is said to be all-pervading, where it's felt throughout the body.

Mostly this energy is felt as pleasant because it comes out of this kind of happy relationship with the meditation object. But as the factor gets developed more strongly, the bodily energy becomes stronger too, and it can become unpleasant. The bodily energy can become strong enough that it's no longer felt as pleasant. It can be felt as a little too intense or at times as overwhelming.

It's not that the meditation at this point has gone wrong or that anything bad is happening. Generally one just needs to open and accommodate this slightly too strong energy. And as the meditation deepens, it tends to smooth out. But sometimes it's a little unpleasant at this point.

Piti is one of the factors that's connected with the strengthening of concentration. It has a quality of happiness, and it's often paired with this word sukha, which I think I've mentioned before, which also means happiness. So together, the kind of enjoyment of the object and the growth of this quality of sukha or pleasure or contentment starts to lead into the second half of the factors, which are the calming factors.

So the fifth factor that appears is the factor of calm or tranquility. And the way that it comes about is as more happiness comes in through this bright energy connecting with the object, finding that delight, a certain satisfaction comes in just based on the meditation. Not based on having a particular experience or object or anything special, but just in the ordinary meditation, the mind starts to become contented. And because there's a quality of contentment, satisfaction, the mind is not tending to go out so much through desire, restlessness, aversion, and so on. So this leads to a sense of the mind starting to settle within itself, finding its contentment within its own operation. And that settling is felt as a calming of mind and a calming of body. It's as though the mind starts to settle within the body itself.

And this is often a kind of new discovery in the meditation process. This unfolding of calm doesn't happen so often in daily life and it's a new experience within meditation after often a lot of active thoughts and restlessness and other hindrances. So as this calm starts to develop, thoughts are no longer so frequently assaulting us. Hindrances are no longer so generally plaguing us. And because there's a sense of calm and the body can relax, there's usually less pain in the body as well.

So it's as though it feels like—and again, you felt this in the first weeks of the retreat—like you come in and the ocean, you're kind of on an ocean with a lot of stormy waters, right? The waters of the hindrances and thoughts and bodily discomfort and restlessness and quite turbulent. And then maybe just for short periods and maybe just for five minutes, ten minutes, this other space opens up where you feel like you've kind of floated into a really calm harbor somewhere, out of the storms of the sea into this calm space. May not last very long, but it's a really different kind of experience.

Emily Dickinson has a poem that kind of expresses this movement, this discovery. It's a section from a

poem called "Wild Nights": "Futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass, done with the chart."

Rowing in Eden. That's kind of what it feels like. It feels like you've come upon this blissful lake for a while—perhaps only briefly, but you've touched it.

At this stage, one can start to open to a different approach to meditation, which is a sense of resting. One has opened to, discovered, unfolded a new quality that has a sense of stillness and rest in it.

Ajahn Amaro, a monk who used to live in Northern California and now serves as the abbot of Amaravati in England, likes to offer this meditation instruction: "Rest in the natural peace and ease of mind and body that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body, and pay attention to that. But if something comes to disturb that peace, then pay attention to that." That's a lovely thing to be able to do, and you can take it as an encouragement, as an instruction anytime you'd like.

Joseph gave that instruction early on in working with the breath: "As I breathe in, I tranquilize the bodily formation. I tranquilize the mental formation. As I breathe out, I tranquilize the bodily and mental formations." So we can make this quality of calm more accessible by suggesting it to ourselves.

Sometimes when this quality of calm comes, it seems like it has snuck up on us, and we may not recognize it. One meditator said that her first note was "calm"—like, is this what they're talking about? She couldn't quite recognize it when it first came.

Because it's a subtle state, it can slip under the radar. Often people will come into interviews and say, "I had really interesting things going on a few days ago. I was working with this pain in my chest and it was really opening. There were a lot of thoughts. I learned a lot about a relationship that I had in the past. But all that's over—there's nothing happening now." Often we overlook the fact that what's happening now is this quality of calm.

The Buddha said the state of peace was a pretty good state. But we often don't see it because it doesn't have the drama of the hindrances or a torrent of thoughts. So it's important to notice it and appreciate it. It really opens the doors to a new movement in meditation. It's the foundation for a lot of inner contentment and inner peace.

This then sets the stage for the unfolding of the next factor, which is the quality of concentration. As the mind settles within itself and is not sending itself out in desire for the future or regret about the past, its natural energy starts to collect. When the natural energy of the mind comes together and is unified, you discover that the mind is naturally strong. Its very nature is strength, and that strength is felt as stability—or you could say stillness.

Whereas calm might be a momentary and easily disturbed state, as it grows further into concentration, there's a sense that this concentration has a power. It has the power to be unmoved, unshaken by some of

the normal comings and goings.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to come and teach at Spirit Rock before we built our retreat facility. We had a big open hillside that was like an amphitheater. We built a platform for him at the bottom of it, and about a thousand people or more—maybe fifteen hundred people—could sit on the hillside and listen to his teachings during these day-long events.

It was amazing to be in his presence. His voice was amplified, but we could see him across the hill. He was so still in his body and in his speech that he transmitted this quality of concentration to all fifteen hundred people who were watching. It was like a samadhi engine that was generating and filling the whole space. Over the day that he taught, you could feel everybody settle, settle, settle.

So concentration has this strong quality where you feel really grounded in the present moment. Even if thoughts come, they're seen in the present moment. It doesn't feel like they're going to knock you off your mindfulness. This is a very satisfying feeling. The mind being stable is a great relief—not being swayed so much by the hindrances, by past and future.

The Dalai Lama put it this way: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility."

Concentration is a big part of inner peace. This factor of concentration, the stability of mind, also prepares the mind for insight. When things become still, then we can see clearly what's happening. In this place of peace and stillness, when an insight comes, it goes deep. Concentration is a beautiful ground for understanding.

Somebody can say something to us in our daily life like, "Body sensations are always changing," and we'll go, "Oh yeah, I've heard that before." But when you're in a concentrated place and you look everywhere in the body and you see every body sensation is changing, it affects your view of the body forever. It goes deep and it affects your relationship to life.

One of the things that happens in concentration is that pleasant things and unpleasant things don't have as much impact on the mind. Someone mentioned this in an interview the other day. They said that they were sitting, they were concentrated, they felt a strong sensation in the leg that normally they would have identified as pain. So from the stable attention of concentration, they looked at it more closely. And in that closer look, they couldn't actually see pain there. All they saw was a strong sensation that really had the quality of neutrality. It was intense, but it was basically neutral. This happens out of concentration. The pleasant and unpleasant things that come to us don't shake the mind so much, don't move us so much.

And this leads to the last of the factors of awakening, which is called equanimity. Equanimity is a state where we're not so thrown by the changing factors of pleasure and pain, and that gives the mind a lovely balance. You could call it balance, you could call it spaciousness, you could call it an openness that can include a lot of different things without being thrown off our centeredness.

In English, sometimes we hear this word equanimity and we think it means unfeeling, but it's not like that. When the mind has this quality of balance and space and openness, actually the beautiful qualities of heart can be felt more directly and more strongly. The strength of equanimity makes us much more open to loving kindness, to compassion, and to joy. So it doesn't become a colder place as equanimity develops. It becomes a warmer place. We have the strength to open, to feel those qualities.

So mindfulness starts the unfolding. The first set of factors are energizing. Then as happiness develops out of the energy, the mind moves into a settled state within itself that leads to the calm and concentration and strength that grows into equanimity.

As you meditate, start to notice as these different factors are arising. They may not last for a long time at first. They're all impermanent. When they come together well, that's kind of a peak experience. It's not something that's going to happen every sitting. But start to look for the balance. Look for the quality of presence or mindfulness, the factor of energy that makes for the alertness, brightness, and interest, and the factor of steadiness or calm.

Particularly keep an eye on the relationship between the energizing factors and the calming factors. It's this balance that is most important for keeping the mind in the kind of really sweet spot of meditation. If the energizing factors are too high, you'll feel a lot of bodily energy and restlessness and a lot of thoughts may dart around taking you into past and future. Then the counterpoint is to bring up the calming factors, maybe go back to a primary object like the breath, work with a spacious awareness on sounds, consciously relax the body.

On the other hand, if the calming factors get too strong and the energizing factors are low, this leads to the state that we call sinking mind. It can be very comfortable, very pleasant, you get a little bit drowsy, you could sit for hours, but the brightness of insight is not happening. So that needs the arising of the energizing factors. You can accomplish that by bringing up energy directly, the antidote to sleepiness, or start doing steady noting on changing objects. And that will wake up the alert, interested wisdom faculty of mind.

When these factors come together and into balance, then we are in the place where we can open to insight, open eventually to awakening.

I'll just close with these two quotes 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."

And from the Anguttara: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future, all will do so by overcoming the five hindrances that stain the mind, by firmly establishing the minds in the four foundations of mindfulness and by cultivating the seven factors of awakening in their true nature."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

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