# Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:59

The talk tonight is on the seven factors of enlightenment.

There's a story you may be familiar with, as it became popular after 9/11—the story of the two wolves, which has been attributed to the Cherokee Nation, although I'm not quite sure of the exact source.

The story goes that a young boy was at school and one of his friends did something to him that was unkind and unfair. He came home quite stirred up, wondering how he should respond—whether he should get back at the person or try to work it out in friendship. He came to his grandfather, explained the situation, and asked what he should do.

The grandfather said, "Oh, I know what you're feeling exactly. This has happened to me many times. It is as though there are two wolves inside me. One is very angry and inclines easily to hatred, looking for vengeance. The other wolf is kind and patient and wants to live in harmony with everyone. These two struggle inside me many times, and both try to dominate my spirit."

The boy asks, "Grandfather, which one will win?"

And the grandfather replies, "The one that I feed."

I like this story because of its simple pointing to an important truth, and also because it really echoes the Buddha's language in working with our minds. The Buddha talked often about our meditation practice being directed towards starving the hindrances and feeding the factors of enlightenment.

We start to understand that through the tools we acquire—mindfulness, loving kindness, and wisdom—we gain the capacity to shape our own minds in the direction that we choose. This is an amazing thing. I never imagined when I was young that this was possible, that I could create my mind in the direction that I wanted it to go. But there are specific practices in our tradition to shape it for wisdom, for loving kindness, for energy, for compassion, for freedom—all the beautiful qualities that we seek. We have tools to build the mind in that direction.

We often don't know how far this development can go until we meet somebody who's really walked this path quite a long way. I think about the Indian teacher Dipa Ma. If you haven't encountered her teachings, she's someone I really recommend to you. There's a whole book on her teachings written by a sangha member, a former IMS staff person, called *Dipa Ma*.

Dipa Ma was teaching the three-month course one year. She was staying in the house across the street,

and one of the notable things was that after she finished lunch, she would do walking meditation. She was not in a mode of "I'm retired because I'm all the way there." She was still a really ardent practitioner, but her being was so developed that she was very inspiring.

One day in a question and answer period, one of the yogis asked her, "What's in your mind?" Wouldn't that be interesting to ask someone really developed—what's in there? What's going on?

Dipa Ma said, "There are only three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and loving kindness."

That's a well-shaped mind. That's really beautiful, and that's the possibility of practice. We can shape our mind in that direction, and it's just a question of doing the work.

When we think about the lists of the Buddha—many lists describing difficult factors of mind, many lists describing beautiful factors of mind—for us as meditators, one of the most significant lists describing the difficulties is the list of the five hindrances. These are the qualities that the Buddha said obstruct wisdom and block the journey to awakening.

But on the other side, in the beautiful qualities, I think equally important for a meditator is understanding these seven factors of enlightenment, because they really become our great allies on this journey. Where the hindrances block the current to awakening, the seven factors move it forward. They are the forces that propel it.

This is from the Buddha: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future, all will do so by surmounting the five hindrances that weaken wisdom, by firmly establishing their minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by correctly developing the seven factors of enlightenment."

This is a very clear statement of the path. This is our task.

These seven factors are briefly: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. I'll talk about them each in some detail, but as an overview, they're called by this name because the Buddha said they lead to enlightenment—therefore they're called factors of enlightenment. That's pretty clear.

They're all described as maturing in release. Each of these factors, he described as maturing in release or liberation. That's where they go.

He compared them using an image of a kind of house that you see in New England a lot—one of these houses with a peaked roof, very common in this part of the country. If you go into the attic, you see how it's constructed. There are these beams or rafters that all go up to the center and support the roof. Many of these run in parallel to support the roof.

He said, "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 enlightenment, she slants, slopes, and

inclines to nibbana."

So as we develop these qualities, they're aiming in just one direction. Like the rafters that only point one way, these factors only point one way also.

At this point in the retreat, I am quite confident that all of you have had experiences of all these factors. You may not have noticed them when they went by. They may not have been of extremely long duration. But I want to talk about them tonight so that you can start to recognize them when they come. Because the first step in developing them is knowing when they're present, knowing what helps them arise, knowing what sustains them, and knowing how to develop them further.

So they lead in the direction of liberation, enlightenment, nibbana. They're also a description of the mind that is poised on the edge of enlightenment. When we develop and collect these factors together in the right balance, that mind is perfectly prepared for an opening into nibbana or the unconditioned. We can't by effort make that opening happen. We can't effort a moment of enlightenment. But what we can do is prepare the mind with these factors so that it is poised on the threshold.

In a way, you could say these factors, when they're brought together and balanced, describe an approximation in mundane terms of the tipping into enlightenment or nibbana. Either way, they're kind of our best attempt to reproduce or imitate this unconditioned element. They lead there; they approximate that state.

The factors have been described by the Buddha as being sequential—one leads to the next, leads to the next, and so on. That's how I'm going to organize the talk tonight, and I hope to show how that development happens naturally. But they also reinforce each other. So one that seems later down the list is also supportive of ones that come earlier. It's not like you have to develop only this one and only then develop the second and only then the third. They all can develop together. But I think understanding the sequence is helpful because it shows how meditation itself develops.

The first factor in the list is mindfulness. It starts the ball rolling. That's why we put so much emphasis on it from the first day. And it also serves to keep the factors in balance. Now, what does that mean, keeping them in balance?

After mindfulness, the next three factors are called arousing factors. They tend to bring up energy. These are the factors of investigation, energy, and rapture. The next three factors are pacifying factors. They lead to the development of calm. These are calm, concentration, and equanimity. Balance means that the three arousing factors are equally matched by the pacifying factors.

You know all the instructions we gave from day one about finding in your posture the balance of alertness and relaxation? This is really to find in the body the expression of these factors of enlightenment. The posture itself leads to the balancing of these factors of energetic awakeness and calm relaxation. Because it's when these really come together that the mind is best poised for insight.

I'd like to talk about all the factors a little bit, beginning with mindfulness. We've said a lot about mindfulness. I don't need to say very much more. But I want to say something that I hope might be helpful as you practice this quality and as you try to understand it.

There's been a lot written about mindfulness and sati and what it all means, and explanations can become very long to the point where I can't tell if I'm doing it right or not after I've read somebody else's definition. So I want to give you a really simple definition: Mindfulness is understanding what our experience is in this moment. And I honestly think that's enough. If you're in touch with the moment and you know what you're experiencing, mindfulness is happening—in the Buddha's vocabulary.

Some teachers will say, "Oh, it's only real mindfulness if there's no greed, aversion, or delusion." That's a very sweet form of mindfulness. That's a very developed form of mindfulness, but I don't think it's the only form of mindfulness. Very simply, when you know what your experience is, mindfulness is being activated. And then it grows and becomes refined.

What I base this on is the way the Satipatthana Sutta is expressed. Because in each of the sections on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the word "understands" is used again and again in this functional sense. The Buddha will say something like: the meditator understands, "I'm breathing in." They understand, "I'm breathing out." They understand, "I'm experiencing a pleasant feeling." They understand, "The mind is affected by lust," or "The mind is unaffected by lust."

In each case, the word used for "understand" is pajanati in Pali. So I take this as the functional definition of mindfulness: this understanding or knowing of our experience. Pajanati is related linguistically to the term for clear comprehension, sampajanya, which has an element of wisdom within it. This understanding of our experience is enough to get the ball of meditation rolling.

When we become mindful, we start to notice things. We see more about our direct experience, and then we become interested. We become curious. Why? Because there is this native intelligence that mindfulness wakes up. Mindfulness brings out this natural interest and wisdom or intelligence to relate to our experience, and that leads to the second factor, which is investigation. This is the quality in Pali known as dhammavicaya.

Andrea talked about this in some detail a week or so ago. We've described how this is not particularly a conceptual investigation, but it's really about drawing our attention close to the direct experience and, you could say, rubbing our attention against the phenomenon of our direct experience. It's kind of like when you want to investigate or understand anything that you really care about—you'll notice how the mind naturally calms down and draws close to that phenomenon.

I was biking up Pleasant Street a couple of years ago, going north on this road. It's a very quiet country lane with very little traffic—that's why it's so good for biking. I was about a mile or two from the center when, all of a sudden, out of the woods on the left side of the road, this black bear emerged. Just kind of

ambling along, wasn't in any hurry. Fortunately, it was in front of me.

I stopped the bike. The bear just sat down in the middle of the road. It wasn't too worried about the traffic either, and just sat there for a while on its haunches, kind of looking around. I didn't want to get too close, but I was very interested. Eventually, a car drove up, and the car was not going around because the bear was sitting right in the middle of the road.

What was very interesting about this experience is that we were all kind of transfixed by seeing the bear. My attention was not wandering very much. I was really right there with that bear. This is how it is when we're really interested in something—the experience is just naturally there with it.

This bear was really kind of a lazy creature and had no real urge to move along. So finally I talked to the driver of the car and said, "Look, why don't you drive by it on one side? I don't think it's going to bother you. Then we can ride by on your other side while you're driving by the bear." So that's what we did. The car drove by, we rode by on the other side, and just as we passed it, the bear said, "Okay, that's enough," and ambled off into the yard of the farmhouse just across the street. Somehow they had a bear in their yard, but we could keep going.

This is how it is when we're with a natural phenomenon that we really want to learn about—the attention is right there with interest, with curiosity, and ready to learn from that experience. This is the quality of investigation. There's a kind of natural warmth to that interest and attention, sometimes described by the term "wise attention." In Pali, the word is yoniso manasikara. It's interesting that the term yoni is the word for womb. So you can think of this as a womb-like attention that gathers around something that we care about in a warm and embracing way.

We can cultivate this factor of investigation, as Andrea described in her talk, and hopefully you've gotten a number of pointers from that. I'll just mention one other that I've found helpful. One of the most difficult things when we're with a meditation focus is that the mind wants to wander off into the realm of conceptual thinking. The more interest we can find in the present, the more likely we are to stay connected.

After some time, the breath may become kind of ordinary. "Oh, I've seen a hundred breaths today. What interest is there in seeing the hundred-and-first?"

So one of the ways to keep interest in the experience of breathing is to ask for a little more noticing of detail. One of the things I sometimes like to do in practicing with the breath is seeing if I can find in each in-breath the beginning, middle, and end. Then, if I can find in each out-breath the beginning, middle, and end of the out-breath. And then if there's a pause before the next in-breath, I focus the attention on a touch point like contact of the seat with the cushion or the contact of the nostrils with the breath.

So these seven points—beginning, middle, end, beginning, middle, end, touching—keep my mind often interested in the breath when just a simple noting of "in" doesn't quite hold it. This is just a way to

investigate, bringing us a little closer to the experience, bringing up the quality of interest. This investigation factor is part of the wisdom element of mind, and so this is, in a way, a very direct way to activate that faculty within us. Mindfulness brings in some of that intelligence. Investigation sharpens it.

When we get interested and curious and are looking closely at something, it tends to bring up our energy. Dullness is related to being disinterested, and energy is related to being interested. And that leads us into the third factor, which is called energy. The Pali term is *viriya*.

It's interesting—the root of the word *viriya* is *vira*, and the meaning in Pali is hero, or it could be heroine. This is the same root as the Latin word *virile*, or the English word virile from Latin—same root. So there's a sense of a heroic quality to this energy.

It's sometimes translated as energy, but other translations of this term have been used, and I'm going to run through a few because taken all together, they really give more of the connotations of what's being pointed to here with *viriya*. It's also been translated as effort, energetic effort, strength, courage, ardor, and enthusiasm. So you can see it's not just raw energy, but it's energy that's directed—in this case, to the path. It has a strong quality of mind applying directly to the practice.

The Buddha put it this way: "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." You may recognize this as the definition of right effort—to abandon the unwholesome and cultivate the wholesome. And this is where energy is directed.

There's the connotation that this effort is a heroic kind of effort. The effort that all of you are engaged in has a quality of heroism about it. And it's a recognition that it's not an easy task to meet these conditioned patterns of reactivity and with the tools of the practice transform them into wisdom and compassion. That's what we're doing moment after moment. And that's not an easy job. How do you transform anger into wisdom, into love? It's not simple. This is why the energy has to be of a heroic quality. And this can only come from our own motivation and aspiration for freedom, for greater peace and understanding.

Some teachers really emphasize the heroic quality of this effort. I was sitting one three-month course here in 1987, and the teachers were in a very heroic effort kind of mode. In every interview, the way we would start off, as a yogi I would relate how many hours I sat, how many hours I walked, and how many hours I slept. That was the start of every interview with my teachers. And from that, they got a sense of the kind of effort I was putting in.

Their guideline was they wanted me to get down to four hours of sleep a night every night. I was used to cruising on retreats at about six hours of sleep. That felt comfortable to me. I'd never tried to get to four before. But that was the challenge. That's what my teachers wanted me to try to do. And so I had the time to do it. I worked at it.

I came in the hall a lot of times sleepy. I couldn't hit four hours right off. I really had to work up to that,

but over the weeks the sleepiness wore away, my sleep needs went down, and I eventually got to the point where I could cruise—it took some effort, but I could do the practice with four hours of sleep a night and not fall asleep very much during the day. That was a very fruitful period of practice. I learned a lot from doing that. It was very rigorous, it was very demanding, and it was very insightful. So I really appreciate the time that I did that.

I think about the way professional athletes train.

You know, I think about the way professional athletes train. I don't know if any of you have favorite sports, but I'm a big fan of tennis. And in the 90s, I really liked Andre Agassi, who was one of the main US players at the time. Agassi was a fitness fanatic. He trained in Las Vegas under this very demanding coach named Gil Reyes, who taught at UNLV, University of Nevada in Las Vegas. Reyes would have Agassi run up and down the hills outside the city so intensely that he would push himself until he threw up. And then Reyes would say, "Okay, that's good effort for today. Come back again tomorrow. We'll do it again."

You talk to professional cyclists—I don't know if you ever watch the Tour de France. That is an amazing feat of endurance. These athletes, and now there's a women's tour also, go for about twenty-eight days of incredible effort every day. One professional cyclist said, "Every time I get on my bike for a race, I know I'm going to be facing eight hours of non-stop pain." That's how they push themselves. That's just for fame and fortune—they're not even getting liberated from doing that!

So that's an encouragement for us, perhaps, to see what this quality of heroic effort might mean in our practice. Sometimes we'll feel inspired to do that. It's not so helpful to do it from a sense of "I really ought to do it," or "I'm not going to be a good yogi unless I do this." But sometimes we get inspired to just extend a little bit—sit a little longer, or sit a few more times in the day, or stay up a little later, get up a little earlier in the morning. And we find that in stretching our capacity, we grow into that way of practicing.

This isn't right for everybody, but it's right for some people. And especially, it may be right for some younger practitioners, because when you're young, it's really good to stretch your wings and see where your capacity is. It can be really helpful.

So that's one style of heroic effort. But there's another style where the virya expresses itself more as perseverance—or you could say persistence.

One of the greatest yogis in Tibet in their entire history is considered to be Milarepa, who was practicing in the eleventh century. He was one of the lineage holders in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, considered to have made unbelievable meditative progress in one lifetime.

Milarepa left a number of disciples, one of whom was very prominent in the lineage—Gampopa. Gampopa had come to Milarepa, who was practicing out in the mountains. Milarepa is the one you see in Tibetan paintings who's just clad in light white robes. If you see a picture on a Tibetan thangka and the yogi is just in these white robes, that's likely to be Milarepa. He would practice in those thin white robes in the

Himalayas in the middle of winter because he learned how to do tummo practice to generate inner heat. So he kept himself alive with the warmth of tummo and by eating nettles out in the wilderness.

Milarepa had been teaching Gampopa for quite a while, and now it was time for the disciple to go off, find his own cave, and do his own practice. They had come to the point where they needed to say goodbye. The student was leaving the master—quite sad at leaving, but it was a necessary step in his own development.

So Gampopa had started off down the mountain track, leaving behind his teacher, and then Milarepa called out, "Wait, wait, come back!" Milarepa said, "There's one more key instruction I need to give you."

So Gampopa came up. Milarepa turned around with his back to Gampopa, flipped up his white robe, and leaned over to show him his buttocks. And this is where the teaching came:

"There is nothing more profound than meditating on this pith instruction. The qualities in my mindstream have arisen through my having meditated so persistently that my buttocks have become as hard as a camel's hoof. You must also give rise to such heartfelt perseverance and meditate."

So this was the pith instruction from the master to the student, and then he sent Gampopa off to do his own practice.

This quality of perseverance or persistence is another way to express the energy of virya. It's just to keep going. Start and keep going.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya puts it this way: "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. This is why we stress in our instructions the quality of relaxation. If you approach each moment from a relaxed frame of mind and you're present, the meditation will gain momentum and that persistence of momentum will develop this quality of virya.

As the energy comes up, the mind becomes brighter. And as the mind becomes brighter in relating to our experience, we find there's a quality that comes in of enjoyment. This is pointed to by the next factor, which is called rapture. In Pali, this is piti.

So piti is the factor of mind that takes a delight in the meditation. This is not like a delight in a sense pleasure—there's a very different experience. It's not stoking sense desire, but it's a very refined enjoyment that's really an appreciation of the quality of the attention itself, the quality of mind. This is sometimes translated as joy, this factor, but please understand it's a meditative kind of joy. It could also be called joyful interest or a rapt attention. We're enjoying being with our direct experience, whatever its nature. It doesn't have to be sensually gratifying. We're enjoying the process of being present.

So we start to find that the present moment is where we want to be. We're not forcing ourselves to let go of the thought stream and come here. The present is where we're finding our delight, our satisfaction.

One teacher who teaches concentration practice on the breath is Ajahn Brahm. He's a British monk who's living in Australia and teaches concentration practice extensively. He said that when you discover that the breath can seem beautiful to you, when you find the beautiful breath, then your practice picks up this quality of rapture, of delight. This is interesting to explore. What would happen if you saw the breath as something beautiful? What if you discovered the beautiful breath? It has a way of really bringing the attention in with an enjoyment of the process.

So rapture is a mental factor, but it has a physical echo or accompaniment in different degrees. Sometimes it feels like there are goosebumps running down the arms. Sometimes it feels like there's a momentary rush of energy, kind of like a lightning bolt in the body. Sometimes there are passing waves of sensation that arise in the body. Sometimes there's a feeling of being uplifted. I don't know if you've ever felt that. Sometimes when the quality of piti is strong, you almost feel like you could float off your cushion. Something is holding you up. And then there's an all-pervading piti where it's felt throughout the body.

Mostly this experience of piti is pleasant because it's coming out of a mind state of enjoyment. Sometimes the physical manifestation can get so strong that it tips into the unpleasant. It feels a little too intense and it's no longer pleasurable. But in its initial state it's felt as pleasurable and it tends to offset the hindrance of aversion. That pleasantness of the bodily energy offsets aversion. If it becomes stronger and starts to be felt as unpleasant, you just need to keep deepening the practice and that will smooth out in time.

So as the pleasantness of piti grows and the enjoyment of the experience, we're not so inclined to send the mind out to past and future for gratification because the moment feels sufficient. This leads into the next factor, which is calm. Also sometimes called tranquility, the Pali word is passaddhi.

Some of the other translations for this factor might be ease or serenity, tranquility or calm. Once I saw it translated as relaxation, which is nice to think about. This is the quality that lets us relax into the moment. This is the first of the pacifying factors. Rapture has the possibility of getting a little overexcited, amping up the energy too much. And so the calm starts to smooth that out and starts to balance out the arousing factors.

When the mind and the body start to feel tranquil in meditation, it's often a new experience. We're not so familiar with this from our busy outside lives in the West. And so when it first arrives, we may not quite recognize it. The experience of calm is quite subtle, and it's easy to overlook. But when it's pointed out, we can start to recognize it and then work with it.

One meditator, when having this experience for the first or second time, noted it as calm.

Like, is that what this is about? Is this calm? So we get to know it a little bit.

When we first find it, it might not feel that satisfying. Coming out of busy lives in the West, we are often accustomed to intensity, to riding dramatic emotions up and dramatic emotions down, and we think that's what vitality is about. Oh, if I'm feeling really strongly, whether it's pleasure or pain, then meditation is really happening. The emotional intensity is really where it's at.

And as calm starts to come in, we may feel a little disappointed. What happened to the intensity of meditation? And there can even come in a little bit of boredom. Well, not so interesting. I was looking for the ride that I got from the emotions. Well, what's going on now?

So it's an interesting point at which to investigate boredom because boredom is basically an aversion to neutrality. When things are high or when things are low, it's easy to stay engaged because it's kind of thrilling either way. When those go out, there's a kind of neutral quality to the mood and the mind goes, not so interesting. This is actually delusion coming in.

So we start to notice it. Oh, this is calm. Not a bad state to be in. Calm is a really wholesome state. And so we start to appreciate. And one of the ways it can be appreciated is in calm, there's an absence of dukkha. So it may not be thrilling, but the absence of dukkha is very significant.

In the early years of meditation practice, for many of us, retreats are characterized by a lot of turbulence. The hindrances are really the main fact of life, sometimes for years in practice. And when we hit this patch of calm, it's a significant turning point.

And it's kind of like we've crossed some stormy ocean. You know, it's got big winds and there are pirate ships and then there's the attack of the giant squid. And all of a sudden, we've entered this big safe harbor where there's really not much happening. And then we can just sort of float on that for a while, still being mindful, but there's a sense of being able to float instead of struggling.

So Emily Dickinson really expressed this well in a poem called "Wild Nights." And for those of you who aren't native English speakers, there are a couple of odd words in this. Futile means useless, of no benefit. And chart is a synonym for a map in nautical terms. So here's the poem from Emily Dickinson:

*Futile the winds to a heart in port.*
*Done with the compass, done with the chart.*
*Rowing in Eden.*

I love this image. This calm space in meditation, it's like we're rowing in the Garden of Eden. Things are at peace. There's fulfillment and there's satisfaction.

So what is happening in the experience of calm is the mind is discovering its own natural peace and ease. That natural peace is always there when we're not stirring it up. It is the basic nature of the mind and our kilesas continue to ruffle the waters. Now we're discovering that natural peace that is the mind's basic quality.

There's a meditation instruction that Ajahn Amaro likes to use. He's an English monk who's now the abbot of Amaravati Monastery in England. And at a certain point in the retreat, he likes to give this meditation instruction. It's all the meditation instruction you ever need. Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body. Then pay attention to whatever disturbs that. Very simple. Rest in peace or pay attention to the disturbance. That's enough.

So resting in that peace when this comes is a piece of what we've been looking for all along. Peace—P-E-A-C-E—of what we've been looking for. There is a deep satisfaction in discovering this quality of calm. The access to that is really a doorway to contentment.

The mind finds satisfaction in its own nature. Then many of the desires for the future and regrets about the past, which tend to stir up restlessness, start to seem irrelevant because the present moment takes on its own kind of fulfillment.

This leads to a shift in our approach to the path, a shift in our understanding. It's really one of the great blessings of the meditative journey. The Buddha said in the Dhammapada this line I really love: "Peace is the highest happiness." I wonder to what extent we actually believe that, because peace is available in any moment when we don't stir it up. How often do we choose that? Or how often are we looking for some other kind of happiness that we think is going to be better?

So often in the West, we believe that ecstasy is the highest kind of happiness, or some special bliss, or some unitive experience is the highest kind of happiness. But the Buddha, who was not a dumb person, said that peace is the highest happiness. I think this is really interesting to explore, and I think it's a very profound comment on human psychology—that this most deeply is what we're seeking and that this is what brings the most fulfillment for us.

Now there are ways that this can be cultivated in meditation. Obviously the development of mindfulness through the other factors is necessary, but there are ways that we can encourage it. I'll just mention a simple one from the Anapanasati Sutta, where the instruction is: "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."

So in this discourse on the mindfulness of breathing, we can use the breath consciously to bring in this feeling of calm. You can play with this and see if it's accessible in this way. But the basic instruction is: when calm comes, notice it, be mindful of it, note it if you're doing that, and relax and trust in it. Settle into the calm and get to know it. It will continue to deepen.

As the calm continues to deepen, it leads into the next factor, which is concentration. The Pali word is samadhi. This is a state of mind where the calm has really become collected. The dispersion into past and future has fallen away. The mind is more united, unified in the present moment. And when it becomes unified in that way, it gathers back all its natural power.

We are constantly giving away the power of our mind through our distractedness. The quality of unification brings incredible power to the mind. The Buddha said the amount of power that comes from a concentrated mind is inconceivable—you can't understand what kind of power is there. For instance, it leads to jhana states, these states of deep absorption, which are very purifying. It leads to psychic powers. Again, one of Dipa Ma's skills is that she had the ability to develop all the different psychic powers that are described in the old texts, described in the suttas. One of the things that her teacher commented on is that she could appear in a room for an interview without using the door. Wish I could do that.

Samadhi is usually translated by the term concentration. We'll continue to use that term because it's so widespread, but it's not a very good translation because the English word has associations that aren't in the Pali. In English, when we say concentration, we usually mean an exclusive focus of attention—like, "I'm trying to concentrate on my homework. Don't distract me with that music." But in the Pali samadhi, the unification is not about a narrow focus of attention. It is about the unification of the mind stuff, the mind as a whole.

It can become unified through one focus like the breath, but it can also become unified in a very expansive kind of awareness, as when you practice choiceless attention or when we did the big mind meditation the other day. As long as the mind is fully in the present moment, that unification is taking place. So the focus can be narrow, the focus can be broad. Unification of mind can be as strong in either state. I like to think of this as a wholeness of mind—when the mind becomes collected, unified, and whole.

Wholehearted is another beautiful term for samadhi. This quality of concentration offers two main benefits.

The first is that it brings a great sense of well-being. You can notice this directly in your meditation practice. When the mind becomes steady in the present moment, how does that feel? It generally feels good, doesn't it? We're not being thrown about by the hindrances left and right. The absence of the hindrances itself is a pleasant experience. There's a sense of well-being that comes from the power of concentration as the mind becomes stable, steady, and strong.

The Dalai Lama expresses this beautifully: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." Samadhi is what gives the mind its strength to remain in this inner peace.

The second significant benefit is that concentration serves as the foundation for wisdom. In one of the suttas, the Buddha says the purpose and benefit of concentration is for wisdom. It's the foundation for insight, because when the mind is steady, it can see more clearly.

Imagine you're on a merry-go-round, seated on one of the horses, going round and round. Your friend approaches the edge and holds up a newspaper announcing, "Here's today's news!" But you're whizzing by so fast you can't read it. The merry-go-round slows down and comes to a stop. Now you're positioned in

front of your friend and can read the headlines clearly. What do the headlines say? "Everything changes. If you hold on, you suffer. Letting go leads to happiness."

When the mind slows down, we see these truths clearly. And when the mind is concentrated, the insights penetrate deeply. They go way beyond the intellect to a place that feels very experiential—into our bones, because concentration brings depth.

One of the powers of concentration is that the mind grows strong and isn't so pushed around by the changing flow of events. It's not so buffeted by the pleasant and unpleasant. This leads us into the seventh factor, called equanimity. The Pali term is upekkhā, and the basic definition is that state of mind not so moved by pleasure and pain. We still see pleasant and unpleasant, we still experience them, but our inner balance isn't pushed around by them.

Sometimes in English, equanimity carries the connotation of not feeling anything, of no longer having emotions. When I first came into Buddhism, I thought the ideal was to be as unmoved as the stone statue of the Buddha appeared to be. But equanimity is not about losing our emotional response.

During a discussion group at the end of one three-month course, I asked people to recount some of their most meaningful experiences over those months. One that several people described was being able to remain centered and steady while still experiencing a full range of changing experiences. They were essentially describing the quality of equanimity and its growth. I think this represents one of the key benefits of a long retreat that doesn't simply disappear when you return to the world. This basic strength of mind will stay with you for some time.

I then asked them, "In that place where you felt centered and unmoved, were you no longer feeling? Were your emotions shut down?" They replied, "Not at all." They said there was actually more metta and compassion arising from that place than in their normal state of mental turmoil. Equanimity truly opens the door to the flowering of beautiful qualities like love and compassion, as well as peace. It's not a cold place at all.

For this reason, Bhikkhu Analayo prefers to translate this not as equanimity but as equipoise. There's a sense that we're poised in the present moment and balanced, but not at all cut off or shut down. Equanimity appears on many of the lists of beautiful qualities in the dharma.

It's included in the paramis, the brahmaviharas, and in the progress of insight described in the Visuddhimagga detailing how meditation unfolds toward enlightenment. It's also found in the factors of enlightenment. What's particularly striking about equanimity is that it consistently appears last in all these lists, suggesting that equanimity represents the culmination of meditative development. I would say the reason it occupies this final position is that equanimity is the closest worldly state to nibbana—the conditioned state of mind that most closely resembles the unconditioned.

It's invaluable to begin noticing when these qualities arise in your meditation, becoming familiar with

each one and recognizing that while they're all wholesome, their particular balance and relative strength shape the mind in different directions. You'll want to discern which factors are strong and which are weak.

One approach I find helpful is maintaining awareness of where I stand with mindfulness, energy, and concentration. Mindfulness serves as the originator, energy represents the arousing factors, and concentration embodies the calming factors. When these three are balanced and strong, meditation feels bright, alert, and peaceful. But energy and concentration can fall out of balance.

When energy exceeds concentration, we feel restless and agitated. When concentration overpowers energy, we may feel dull and slip into what's called "sinking mind"—a drowsy state that resembles sleepiness but originates from a wholesome place. We feel dull and can space out. Understanding how each factor is generated allows us to restore balance through skillful application.

A practical way to work with these factors builds on the attitude inquiry we often suggest—checking for the presence of greed, aversion, and delusion. Sometimes this inquiry yields negative results: Look for greed? No. Look for aversion? No. Look for delusion? No. What then?

This is where checking for wholesome factors becomes invaluable. How's the mindfulness? How's the interest? How's the energy? Is there enjoyment? Do I feel peaceful? Is the mind strong? Is there equanimity toward pleasure and pain? You can identify from direct experience which factors are present and to what degree.

As familiarity with these factors deepens, you'll understand what conditions their arising and what sustains them. When all seven are harmoniously present, there's not only a foundation for insight and clear seeing—there's also the possibility of opening to a moment of enlightenment. We cannot force or control such moments, but developing these factors is within our capacity. We can bring the mind into that balance from which opening becomes possible. That's all we can do. The rest we entrust to the Dhamma.

The Buddha taught: "Bhikkhus, these seven factors of enlightenment, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering."

Sometimes we might wonder whether the complete destruction of suffering remains available to anyone in this day and age. Does this still happen for contemporary meditators? I'd like to share an excerpt from the biography of a Thai monk named Luang Por Liem, or Ajahn Liem.

Ajahn Liem was a student of Ajahn Chah. When Ajahn Chah knew he was dying, he appointed Ajahn Liem to assume the abbotship of Wat Pa Pong in Thailand, essentially anointing him as his primary Dhamma successor. This account describes part of Luang Por Liem's practice experience under Ajahn Chah, dating back to 1969.

In this rainy season, Ajahn Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity, so I increased my effort. Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit in meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and then stop to have a rest, but now I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture.

A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body, as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, an experience of the whole body becoming completely light and at ease. Cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. The body felt tranquil, cool, and light.

This experience continued on throughout that whole year—not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years now, all from that one time. It feels like there are no proliferations of the mind anymore. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before—the kilesas concerning the other sex, or all kinds of ambitions that I had before—I don't know where they all disappeared to. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose.

There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. The experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change at all, all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on and it has been stable, continuous and without changes.

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

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