Seven Factors of Enlightenment (Satta Bojjhaṅga)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:33

You may have noticed that we've been a little heavy in the beginning of the retreat on working with difficulties. Monica talked about the hindrances, Vance talked about greed and aversion, and Sally talked about delusion. You may think, oh, that's all there is. So far, you've probably been rescued by Greg's teachings on metta. Thank goodness there's been something uplifting, right? Otherwise, it's been maybe hard going.

But the retreat is starting to turn a corner where we're really going to be encouraging you to pay as much attention to wholesome factors as difficult factors. The talk this evening is the start of that.

Tonight I want to talk about the seven factors of enlightenment. The Buddha talked about a lot of lists of wholesome factors—there's the Eightfold Path and the Brahma Viharas and the five spiritual faculties. But in my opinion, the list of the seven factors is the most important one for meditators. Because as you take up the process of meditation as part of the Eightfold Path, these are the factors of mind that carry you, carry us to liberation. These are the things that we want to start keeping an eye on as our practice unfolds, as it develops.

In the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, the Buddha only mentioned two lists of mental factors. One was the hindrances and the other was the seven factors. So I think this points to its central role, as he saw it, in the unfolding of our Satipatthana practice. Sally said that one of the ways we understand our Dharma practice is that we begin to starve the hindrances. We don't feed them any longer. And in turn, we grow, we build up the factors of enlightenment. So at this stage in the retreat, it's really helpful to start tuning into the growth of these wholesome factors. How wholesome can it get?

Dipa Ma was teaching a three-month course here one time. She was one of the teachers on a three-month course. And it was really sweet to see her because every afternoon after lunch, she would be doing walking meditation in front of her house. She was staying in the house across the street. After lunch, about one o'clock, you could see her there doing her walking meditation. Someone as developed as Dipa Ma still doing her walking meditation after lunch.

So one of the yogis at one point in the retreat asked her—they were trying to figure out, what's it like to be you? But they had to ask it in a more refined way. So they said, what's in your mind? And Dipa Ma replied, she only had three things in her mind: peace, concentration, and metta. That's a nice mind. That's a nice place to hang out. That was her mind. And she was still doing walking meditation. She was still developing

the path.

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."

So here it is in a nutshell. We learn to work with the hindrances, we apply the four foundations, and we build up the factors of enlightenment. This is our path in a brief description.

So what are the seven factors? I want to go through them briefly and then I'll talk a little more about the group. They are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

When you look at this list, you see it starts with mindfulness, and that's the factor that keeps them all in balance. This is a little bit what Monica talked about in her talk, how mindfulness herds the other factors, keeps them in order.

The next three factors—investigation, energy, and rapture—bring up energy. So they're called arousing factors. And then the last three factors are called the pacifying factors. Calm, concentration, and equanimity settle that energy down and bring in basically the factors of tranquility.

So this is the broad sweep of the seven factors, and the Buddha said that they are sequential. One leads to the next, leads to the next, leads to the next. So we'll talk about how that works. They're sequential and they also support one another. So it's not like you have to get all the way through mindfulness and only then does a little investigation come up, and only then a little energy comes.

They all grow up together.

I don't want this talk to sound too idealistic because I think all of you have been experiencing these factors already, but sometimes briefly and sometimes not noticed. But it's really helpful to begin to notice them because when we understand how they feel, we also understand how they come into being and how they grow to maturity. This is part of what's pointed to in the fourth foundation. We are to understand their arising and their growth. So by putting more attention on these wholesome factors, we'll be fulfilling that fourth foundation, and it really helps them to grow.

"Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too, when a meditator develops and cultivates the seven factors of enlightenment, that person slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbana." So in other words, these factors are leading us to liberation. Whether you want to go there or not, that's where these are going. And I hope you like that destination because that's where it's headed.

So you can understand this in two ways. One is that these factors lead in that direction, and that's why they're called factors of enlightenment. The other way to understand it is that these factors describe a mind that is so balanced and so developed that it is next door to nibbana. So in a way, we can't make the

opening to nibbana happen. The opening to the unconditioned happens by some kind of grace. All we can do is cultivate the factors that bring the mind close to that. And that's what the seven factors of enlightenment do. They bring the mind as close as can be developed to nibbana, and in a way the factors converge on nibbana. And at some point they get close enough that the mind tips over and opens into the unconditioned. So this is really our work, to bring the mind as close as we can to the realization of the unconditioned.

One small note: generally it's understood the first glimpse of the unconditioned is called entering the stream. One understands then the full possibility of freedom and one has entered the stream of the Dhamma. So this is called the moment of stream entry, this realization. This is where the factors of enlightenment are going.

There's a little bit of controversy around the word. The Pali word is bodhi and it can be translated as either enlightenment or awakening. So you've probably heard both. Different translators will use one or the other. It's interesting, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Analayo have recently had some dialogue through articles about which is more appropriate. Bhikkhu Bodhi favors enlightenment and Bhikkhu Analayo favors awakening. So you can take your pick.

I'm going to use enlightenment because it's a word that has fallen out of favor in Dhamma circles these days. Awakening seems more generic and more broadly appealing. Enlightenment sounds a little elitist, whereas awakening seems—oh, anybody can do that. Anybody can wake up. But it leads to titles like I saw for a workshop at one point at a different Dharma center: "Awakening Through Journaling." We're not encouraging that here. We don't think journaling leads into the seven factors of enlightenment by and large. So the word enlightenment means something special in the whole Buddhist tradition. So that's the word I'm using tonight. You can translate it in your own way.

So these factors are sequential. Mindfulness kicks it off, keeps them in balance. The first three bring up energy, the second three calm it down. And it really points to, we need to develop them in such a way that the arousing factors and the calming factors are balanced. That's what brings the right mind of meditation. And we've been pointing to this many times with our emphasis on body posture: have a body posture that is alert and energized, but at the same time relaxed. So this balance of factors is really needed. I'll talk at the end about what happens if it gets out of balance one way or another.

The first factor is mindfulness. We've talked a lot about mindfulness. Dawn just gave a talk on the First Foundation. Monica gave a talk on sati and how it brings factors together. I gave a talk on mindfulness of breathing. So I don't need to say a lot more about mindfulness.

You've been doing it. That's the most important thing. You've all been doing it.

I just want to emphasize this word in the Satipatthana Sutta: "breathing in long, one understands, one breathes in long." "Feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a pleasant feeling." This word

"understands"—pajanati—is very closely related to sampajanya, which is clear comprehension. And this is the opening of wisdom.

So mindfulness has within it the movement to wisdom. One of the things that happens when mindfulness starts to relate to our experience is it gets interested. There's a wisdom aspect that's getting interested in what's going on, that's getting curious within mindfulness. And that's what leads directly to the next factor, which is investigation.

The Pali is vichaya dhamma. Vichaya means investigation. Dhamma, in this case, can be interpreted three different ways. It's kind of interesting. The Buddha explained it two different ways. The commentaries explained it another.

The first is vichaya dhamma as investigation of the dhamma—the teachings, the truth, nature, the way things are. That's the broadest sense of investigation.

Then the Buddha also described vichaya dhamma as investigation of states—meaning states of mind. What's wholesome and leads to freedom, what's unwholesome and leads to suffering. This is an important discernment to make to support our practice in the right direction.

The third meaning of dhamma, probably from the commentaries, is dhamma as phenomena. Dhamma is also used meaning all the phenomena of our experience. So investigating our experience.

It can be understood in our tradition in all these ways. They all have relevance. They are all useful. They're all useful ways to explore.

So how do we investigate? In meditation practice, investigation is mainly nonverbal. We could get really conceptual about any part of our experience. We could get conceptual about mindfulness, about the six senses, their objects, the sense bases, all of that. But this is not really the purpose of investigation. It's to feel our direct experience more closely.

So investigation means let our attention come closer to the object. And this is kind of illustrated well by vitaka vichara. We aim and we rub toward anything—toward the breath, toward sensations, to sounds, thoughts, emotions, moods, feeling tone, intention, sights, tastes, smells, anything that's part of our experience. We bring our attention close to it and then we rub to get the feeling of it. That's the investigation.

In that rubbing, we start to notice, oh, is this permanent or impermanent? Is this personal or universal? So as we rub, we're picking up these universal characteristics that lead to insight.

Investigation especially among the factors is a wisdom function. Mindfulness has it within it. Investigation is strongly a wisdom function. It really looks to understand the nature of things, the dhamma of things.

Sometimes people ask, how do I develop more wisdom in meditation? One answer is, develop this factor

of investigation.

Like everything else, it has to be done with balance. One can over-investigate. And that means looking too much for something more. It's like we can get into trying to milk our practice and conceptualize around it. And that stirs the mind up more.

So this investigation described as wise attention in Pali is yoniso manasikara. Manasikara means attention. Yoniso is often translated as wise or appropriate or getting to the root.

The origin of this term reveals something profound: yoni means womb. So yoniso can be understood as a womb-like attention. This means we encompass the phenomena, we nourish it, we nurture it. There's a quality of warmth in this kind of investigation that we bring to any aspect of our experience.

This is a way of approaching nature through our experience. We want to be womb-like in our surrounding of it with attention.

There are various ways to investigate. Dawn spoke about in a guided meditation the other morning looking for the beginning, middle, and end of an in-breath—beginning, middle, end of an out-breath. Many of you played with that and found it really helped with continuity. Bringing an interest, bringing a curiosity can help us stay connected to what we're paying attention to.

Sayadaw U Pandita used to give meditators an instruction like this. He'd say, "All right, next time you come for an interview, I want you to report three sensations that you notice with an in-breath. Three distinct sensations. And just saying 'in' is not a sensation. It's things like pulsing or tingling or pressure or relaxation, expansion, contraction, warmth, coolness. Can you pick out three separate sensations that happen when you take an in-breath? And then can you pick out three separate sensations that happen on an out-breath? Come report that to me next time."

If you were reporting to U Pandita, that would pick up your interest. So people looked. I looked because my teachers asked it of me. And so you would go back to U Pandita and you'd report these three. And then he'd say, "Okay, next time bring me one more that's different. Keep investigating. Don't rest on your laurels. Keep looking."

This is fun if you want to play with it. We're not going to ask you for it, so you can be relaxed. But see if it brings in that interest in investigation that is the opening of wisdom. You notice when you're interested in something—like are there three sensations—the attention is there really naturally.

I was riding a bike the other day down Pleasant Street, and this deer walked across the road in front of me and then reached the other side of the road and then made this beautiful leap into the woods on the other side of the road. As soon as it came, my attention was just there with it, not forced, not straining. It was just a delight to see. This is investigation.

When we investigate, it takes some energy. That picks up and leads into the third factor, which is energy.

The Pali here is viriya. This is an interesting word. We translate it as energy. It could also be effort, energetic effort, strength, courage, ardor, enthusiasm. All these things point to the mind state of viriya.

Viriya is this kind of effort and energy that's directed to the path. So just having physical energy in the body—that alone is not viriya. Viriya needs to be directed to developing the meditation, developing wholesome qualities of mind.

The root of it is the Pali word vira, which means hero. So you can think of this as a heroic kind of effort. Do you ever get the feeling in these two-plus weeks that you've been making a heroic effort? You have. You have. That's this factor of viriya. I think every one of you has been making a heroic effort.

And it has the same root as the English word virile—vira, virile, the same root word. The Buddha said, "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the work of cultivating wholesome states." So this is the quality of virya. We're willing to put in the work to develop the path even when it's hard.

Of course, this comes out of our motivation for practice. If we don't have motivation, we won't put in this kind of energy and effort. When I think about this quality, I think about the training that world-class athletes go through. It is arduous. You look at these figure skaters, gymnasts, somebody like Simone Biles—I think she's probably been training since she was like five years old, maybe younger. Hours and hours and hours of training go into the kind of agility and balance and strength that she has.

In the field of tennis, which is my interest, Andre Agassi used to train so hard in Las Vegas with his physio trainer that he would be running up hills until he threw up from fatigue. That's what the trainer demanded from him. And then I also sometimes follow pro bike riding. The Tour de France is awesome. A cyclist was quoted as saying, "Every time I race, I know I'll have eight hours nonstop pain." And the training is the same. They train on hills. They train in the Alps. They train in the Pyrenees. Eight hours of nonstop pain. This is just for fame and fortune. You know? We're after something a lot bigger than that.

So it's beautiful to see you all making this kind of heroic effort. One three-month course, I was practicing—Joseph and Sharon were my teachers, and they were into a very virya kind of phase. They kept encouraging us to really shrink, shrink, shrink our hours of sleep. That was really hard. But we'd come into an interview—this is a phase they were in, they're not doing it now, we're not doing it now. Every time we walked into the interview, we'd have to report: How many hours did you sit, how many hours did you walk, and how many hours did you sleep? There was no hiding. I really worked hard to bring my sleep down and to try and come up to the standard that they were looking for. That was very useful, but it was a lot of work.

Virya expresses itself in this kind of heroic endeavor. It also expresses itself in perseverance. There was a Tibetan yogi, one of the most famous yogis in the whole Tibetan history named Milarepa, who was a fantastic yogi in around the 11th century. He spent a lot of his time meditating on his own in remote

mountain solitudes. But he also developed some very strong students who would come and practice near him and get instruction from him. He had two primary students that I know of, Gampopa and Rechungpa.

At one point he'd been training Gampopa for a number of years in this remote retreat location, but he now thought it was time for Gampopa to go off on his own. So he was sending him off. Gampopa didn't really want to go because he had a great love for his teacher who was very inspiring to him. So they bid farewell. Gampopa was sad, but he was walking down the trail, leaving the retreat.

He got partway down the trail and Milarepa said, "Wait, wait, come back. I have one more teaching." So Gampopa walked back up to Milarepa. One of the things about Milarepa that was so outstanding is that he would dress through the Tibetan winters in just a pair of white robes, white cotton robes. He would practice through the winter in those robes because he had developed this practice called tummo or inner heat.

So Milarepa called Gampopa to him and said, "I have one more instruction for you."

And Gampopa said, "Yes, venerable sir, what is it?"

Milarepa turned around, flipped up his cotton robe, and showed him his backside. And what he said was, "There is nothing more profound than meditating on this pith instruction: the qualities in my mind stream have arisen through my having meditated so persistently that my buttocks have become as hard as a camel's hoof."

So this was the last teaching—develop buttocks that are as hard as a camel's hoof. He said, "My son, you must also give rise to such heartfelt perseverance and meditate." This is his last instruction to Gampopa, who went off to become a very famous yogi and teacher in his own right. So my noble children, please remember this instruction.

This quality of viriya can also express itself simply as perseverance. You don't have to stay up all night to manifest viriya. Sometimes it's just perseverance.

This is from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "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 which is 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."

When there is this energy and the mind gets connected to our experience, eventually that brings about a kind of delight in what we're seeing. When the delight starts to come into the meditation, this is the quality we call piti. Usually translated as rapture, but to me rapture aims really high. Rapture to me is an experience of profound bliss, mind and body. And rapture doesn't start off like that. Simply noticing that you're enjoying the meditation, you're delighting in the meditation, is the sign of piti.

I'll call it rapture because it's the common translation—I don't want you to get confused when you go to

read other teachings. But it can also be called joy. It can be called rapt attention. It can be called joyful interest. But there's that sense that in connecting to the present moment, some enjoyment of that starts to come in. This is piti.

You find out the meditation is kind of where you want to be. You're not so much forcing your mind back into the moment, but the mind starts to enjoy being in the moment—partly because we're stepping out of the disturbing excursions into past and future, partly because there is this innate pleasure in being here and being present. There's something satisfying about it.

One teacher in Australia—I don't know if anyone has mentioned this, I think someone may have—Ajahn Brahm, talks about discovering the beautiful breath in meditation. If you can start to see the breath or your anchor as beautiful, it really helps keep the attention with it. So you can look for that. We can learn to perceive things as beautiful. Even if they start off neutral, we can start to see the beauty in something like the breath.

So rapture is a mental factor. All the seven factors are mental factors, but it's often accompanied by physical signs and accompanied by rising energy in the body. The energy can take different forms. The commentaries explain it as minor rapture, where there are kind of goose bumps all over. As momentary rapture, sometimes there's just a flash of energy like lightning that goes through the body. As showering, and this is where it feels like waves of energy are passing through the body, but they do pass through. There's uplifting, and one can feel almost as though one could float up off one's chair or cushion. This is actually the energy that when strengthened leads to yogis being able to levitate. This is not an illusion. Yogis who develop this quality actually have the ability to levitate. And then all-pervading, where the energy is throughout the body.

Mostly rapture is a pleasant experience. But sometimes the energy can become so strong that it's uncomfortable. If that happens, one may be tempted to back off from developing the factors to get more ease. But the general advice is to continue because as the factors continue to develop, this factor of sukha comes in, which translated would be pleasure. But it's a kind of sweetness of mind and body that brings a real mellowing to the experience of the energy of rapture. So we work through the little bit of discomfort, and as the meditation goes on, then there's a natural calming down.

But because the rapture is essentially pleasant, it naturally leads into the next factor in the sequence: tranquility.

Tranquility takes the energy of rapture and, once it's been joined with sukha, begins to calm it all down. The Pali term is *passaddhi*, which can be translated as tranquility, ease, serenity, calm, or relaxation. This is the first of the factors that begins to bring in peace, pacifying our experience of mind and body.

Because the rapture has had a pleasurable quality, and then it's joined with peace, it brings about a sense of inner contentment. The mind feels that it can settle in itself from that contentment.

Don't necessarily look for this contentment to be a full-blown experience that lasts a whole hour with strong intensity. In the beginning, this may be quite fleeting. But you notice it by the factor of calm—it feels okay. This okayness is the start of a contentment that can really deepen. So you look for it in its less intense form at first, but it's a real form, a real appearance. These moments of calm, moments of tranquility—notice that there's something satisfying in that, even if it doesn't last long.

From the Buddha: "For one whose mind is uplifted by rapture, the body becomes tranquil and the mind becomes tranquil. On that occasion, the enlightenment factor of tranquility is aroused by the practitioner."

I really appreciate this expression of the body becoming tranquil. We don't often hear much about this in meditation, but the fact is that this tranquilizing of the body, this calming of the body, is a really important movement. Most of us, when we come into meditation—I was certainly this way—have had so many chaotic experiences in our lives that our bodies have accumulated a lot of stored tension. So when I sat down, the body wasn't tranquil. When I stilled it, there was all this wild energy running around that wanted to be released. But what it really wanted was to calm down.

In time, the body energy does calm down. When the body becomes tranquil and the mind becomes tranquil, that really opens the door for this contentment to come through. Then there unfolds, as it grows, a new ease in meditation. We can settle into the moment without so much struggle. We're not looking to get rid of things. We're not looking to develop anything special. Just the way it is becomes okay.

In this calming, thoughts also begin to settle. We're not being so assaulted by the movement of thoughts and emotions. When we first discover this experience of calm in meditation, it's often completely new. I had not known this in my outer life. This was something completely foreign to me when I first encountered it.

One meditator told me that when they first came upon this and tried to note it, all they could do was say, "Calm? Is this it? Is this what they're talking about?" Because it was a completely new kind of experience. So it takes time to get to know it.

In my meditative journey, it was like I'd crossed a stormy ocean with big thundering waves and pirates on the open sea and giant squid attacks coming at us. Then suddenly we landed in this broad harbor that felt calm and peaceful and safe.

There's this lovely poem by Emily Dickinson that points to this. I'm going to read it twice because the wording is a little archaic: "Futile the winds to a heart in port, done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden."

This "rowing in Eden" is the summation line. Let me read it again. If you're not a native English speaker, the word "futile" is an odd word not used very much—it means useless. She's saying the winds are useless when the heart is in port. And the word "chart" here means the map that a captain or pilot would navigate by with their ship.

"Futile the winds to a heart in port, done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden."

That's what it feels like—we've landed in Eden in our meditation.

So the mind discovers that its own peace and ease are quite natural things. Ajahn Amaro has this meditation instruction that really emphasizes this. He says, "Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body, and then pay attention to whatever disturbs that." And we see that if we aren't disturbing ourselves with our wandering thoughts and all the emotions they stir up, if we stop disturbing ourselves, that natural peace and ease is always accessible. It's always there. We can learn to rest in it. We can find a reliable path to that and learn to rest there.

When we discover that kind of contentment in meditation, the movement of desire doesn't seem so relevant. Why would I want to go there when I've got this here? So then the mind is less inclined to go away to past and future.

This is not necessarily an easy place to know what to do. I think Sally mentioned last night that when the mind moves into subtle or neutral experiences, we can often not know how to respond. And this can be a factor of delusion—that's the kind of not knowing. We might feel like, oh, nothing's happening now. And we might get a little bored.

I don't know if you've tracked this cartoonist, Gahan Wilson, who has done cartoons for many years. Toward the later phases of his career, he started setting a lot of his cartoons in Zen meditation halls. There's this one cartoon where there are two monastics, one older and one younger, sitting next to each other in the hall. The older one is leaning over to say to the younger one, and the caption just says, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

You might have felt that from time to time. Whoa, it's calm. What happens next? We're so used to dramatic emotions of highs and lows and intensity. When that goes out, it's like we're adrift. What happens next?

But calm can be a wonderful experience to soak in. So I would note it, recognize this is calm. It has been spoken of fairly highly by the Buddha and others. Appreciate the opening and learn to make a home there. It's a really wonderful ally on this whole journey. It is the foundation of contentment.

The Buddha said something interesting at one point. We don't talk about this a lot, but he said, "Peace is the highest happiness." I think it's really interesting to contemplate: Do we believe this? If we believe this, then calm, tranquility is what we've been looking for. If we don't believe it, we think, well, this is a nice stopgap, but what I'm really after is the next high, a more intense bliss, a more full-body kind of rapture. That's what really should be happening.

But according to the Buddha—and I don't think he was kidding—peace is the highest happiness. See if that starts to make sense to you.

One of the nice things about believing that is that peace is always accessible. When the mind lets go of past

and future and all that it brings, peace is available. I find this a really interesting comment on human psychology. Somehow I don't think Western psychology quite understands this yet. But I think the Buddha's pointing was profound and accurate.

So then this tranquility is also onward leading. And of course where it leads is when the mind settles in itself, it becomes unified. This is the next factor of concentration. We talked about concentration as the unification of mind. The proximate cause—I don't know if I said it in the talk last week—the proximate cause of concentration is happiness. This contentment is really what allows the mind to settle and unify. That is where concentration develops from. Again, from the Buddha: "For one whose body is tranquil and who is happy, the mind becomes concentrated."

It truly is that simple. When the body is tranquil and the mind is happy, concentration naturally arises. On that occasion, the enlightenment factor of concentration is awakened within the practitioner.

Since we explored concentration in detail last week, I won't elaborate extensively here. But it's worth remembering that concentration offers two profound benefits: it feels deeply nourishing, and it opens the path to insight. This dual quality makes it such a valuable factor in our practice.

As the mind becomes unified, it develops a strength previously unknown. Before finding tranquility and concentration, the mind gets tossed about by every thought and emotion that arises within, by external circumstances that unfold around us—even in a protected environment like this retreat, events occur that can stir us up. As concentration deepens, the mind derives a strength and stability that remains unshaken by both internal experiences and external conditions.

This strength naturally leads to the next factor: equanimity, known in Pali as *upekkhā*. You may recognize *upekkhā* as the fourth of the *brahmaviharas*. I noticed a request for someone to speak specifically about equanimity, and indeed, someone will offer a full talk on this topic. For now, I'll share just a few essential points.

Fundamentally, equanimity is a state of mind born from strength—a quality that remains unmoved by pleasure and pain. When pleasurable experiences arise, they don't trigger greed. When unpleasant experiences emerge, they don't provoke aversion. Neutral experiences are simply noticed, as the mind no longer churns restlessly.

The root meaning of *upekkhā* comes from its etymology: "looking upon." It suggests the capacity to step back from entanglement in the flow of objects and observe from a place of stability.

Sometimes, particularly in English usage, equanimity carries the connotation of not feeling, or that emotions shouldn't be present—that if you're experiencing emotions, you haven't achieved true equanimity. This misunderstanding distorts the genuine meaning of *upekkhā*. True equanimity allows emotions to be present without being disturbed by them. It doesn't mean we cease to care.

In the *brahmaviharas*, the near enemy of equanimity is indifference—a complete lack of caring. When someone suffers and we think, "It doesn't matter to me; I'm equanimous about that," we've actually slipped into indifference.

This reveals the beautiful balance within the *brahmaviharas*. Equanimity must be supported by *mettā*, compassion, and *muditā*, or it will inevitably deteriorate into cold indifference. When equanimity is present alongside the other heart qualities, it maintains a balance that is neither cold nor detached.

One year, at the conclusion of the three-month retreat, we held a discussion group right here in this hall with all the practitioners who were completing their retreat. They shared their learnings and retreat highlights. Many spoke of gaining a new ease with life's changing conditions as one of their most significant discoveries. This capacity represents the essence of equanimity.

To me, this stands as the most reliable outcome of extended retreat. While it emerges in shorter retreats as well, it becomes more pronounced after longer periods of practice. We develop greater balance with life's changing conditions, no longer thrown about so easily by the inevitable ups and downs. It's truly beautiful.

I asked these practitioners whether this balance felt cold during their meditations, whether their emotions had been shut off. They responded unanimously: "Not at all. It was a place of tremendous warmth. Because I wasn't so disturbed, *mettā* and compassion flowed much more freely."

This captures the authentic meaning of equanimity. When we're settled, we gain greater access to love and compassion, not less. It's never a cold, withdrawn state. When equanimity begins sliding toward indifference, it simply needs to be warmed again through *mettā* and compassion.

Equanimity appears across multiple frameworks in our tradition: the *brahmaviharas*, the *paramis*, the factors of enlightenment, and the progress of insight described in the *Visuddhimagga*. In every one of these lists, it appears as the final factor, indicating that everything else leads toward this culmination.

In our tradition, equanimity represents the closest worldly state to *nibbāna*. When we reach equanimity in our development—properly balanced with the other factors—we find ourselves at the threshold of opening to the unconditioned. All these various lists point toward the same reality, the same unfolding development of awakening.

As you practice, you can start to tune in to when these factors are showing up. They don't have to be strong or overpowering or last an hour—they can appear quite briefly. Calm appears. Interest appears. A pleasurable experience in meditation arises. Some stability manifests. Some ease emerges. This is the arising of all these different enlightenment factors. So take care to notice them. The more you notice, the more you'll understand how they got there, and then also how to grow them. We want to learn what leads to them and what leads to their cultivation. That starts with noticing when they're present.

And then you want to keep them in balance. If the arousing factors are out of balance with the calming factors, the mind is likely to be alert but agitated. If the calming factors are stronger than the arousing factors, then the mind may be stable but dull. Sometimes we call this sinking mind. You've been developing calm, some degree of concentration, but then it feels like you're almost nodding off in dullness—this is sinking mind, because the energy has gotten low. The pacifying factors are high, but the energy is depleted. You need to bring up the energizing factors.

I try to practice in such a way that if my teacher came up and tapped me on the shoulder and asked about the factors, I would always know where mindfulness, energy, and concentration were in my experience. These three kind of sum up the whole system. Mindfulness originates and keeps everything in balance. Energy represents the arousing factors. Concentration represents the calming factors. So start to monitor where these three factors are through your sittings, through your walking meditation, and through your in-between moments. See if they can be brought up and then balanced—mindfulness, energy, concentration. If you keep these three in balance, the path is really going to develop beautifully.

One of the questions that comes up is: Okay, you're teaching us to bring our mind to the doorway of enlightenment. Does this happen for people in the West? It does. Some opening to the unconditioned does happen with some regularity on long retreats, both at IMS and at Spirit Rock. This does happen in this day and age.

And so then the question is: What about complete liberation, the kind the Buddha was talking about? The Buddha said, "Practitioners, 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 the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering." The complete destruction of suffering. Does this still happen? It's rare.

But I'd like to read you a section from the autobiography of Ajahn Liam. Ajahn Chah was a great meditation master in Thailand who lived in the last century. He came here and taught at IMS in the early days—he was the first teacher for Ajahn Sumedho and Jack Kornfield, a truly charismatic monk and wonderful teacher. When he was no longer able to teach, he passed on the abbotship of his main monastery to Ajahn Liam. Ajahn Liam is still alive and is still the abbot in Thailand of Wat Ba Pong. He's still teaching. You can still meet him.

This is a description from Ajahn Liam of his practice one year when he was with Ajahn Chah. Around the middle of the rainy season, Ajahn Chah encouraged the monastics to practice with special intensity, so Ajahn Liam increased his efforts and results became evident.

This is from Ajahn Liam: "Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally, I would sit meditation until about ten or eleven p.m. and then stop to have a rest. But on this day, 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 body becoming completely light and at ease, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness."

The body felt tranquil and light. This experience continued throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued unchanging for many years, all from that one time. It feels like there are no sankhāras, no proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before, all kinds of ambitions that I had—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 now. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without change.

This is Ajahn Liam's confession, you might say, of his complete awakening. It's beautiful that he would be that revealing with us. He's still alive and teaching in Thailand. So this still happens.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. This same state still lasts on and has been stable, continuous, and without change.

So thank you for your attention. We have a little over thirty minutes now for walking meditation, and then the last sitting of the day with chanting.

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