The Seven Factors of Awakening

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:06

There was a story that made the rounds around the time of 9/11, one that came from the Native American tradition. Many of you probably heard it at the time.

A young boy had gone to school one day and had a very hard time because his classmates were picking on him and giving him great difficulty. He came home from school disturbed and related the story to his grandfather, saying that he wanted to go back and fight with the other kids who had picked on him. He asked his grandfather what he thought he should do.

The grandfather said, "Oh, I know this place well. I have had these same struggles all through this life." He continued, "It's as though there are two wolves living inside me. One of them is angry, enjoys hatred, and wants to seek vengeance. But the other wolf is kindly, full of concern for people, and wants to find harmony with everyone, even those who have hurt me. They struggle inside for my heart. Each one tries to dominate and wants to win."

The young boy said, "So grandfather, which one wins?"

The grandfather replied, "The one that I feed."

I like this story not only because it has great relevance for our life and for spiritual life in general, but also because the vocabulary is very similar to language the Buddha used in describing the course of our spiritual journey. The Buddha talked often about how our journey unfolds by starving the hindrances—those five difficult energies that Winnie talked about last week—and feeding what are called the factors of awakening.

So I want to talk tonight about these positive qualities within us that it's the purpose of our practice to feed and make grow, as we simultaneously weaken or starve the hindrances so that they tend to fade away.

There are seven qualities that the Buddha talked about, and he gave them the name "the seven factors of awakening." You may have also heard them called "the seven factors of enlightenment." The root of the word in Pali is *bodhi*, which comes from the same root as Buddha. It means to awaken. This translation of "enlightenment" is a strange Westernism, but really the word in Pali clearly points to waking up, awakening. So I'm going to use the term "the factors of awakening" here.

We shape our minds through cultivating these seven wholesome qualities through the practice we're doing, as we weaken the afflictive forces—you could call them the hindrances or the *kilesas* or the taints. This is how the meditative journey unfolds. This is how our spiritual path unfolds in this tradition.

These seven factors lead us to awakening and describe the mind that you might say is perched on the edge of awakening. They are capable of great depths of development. There may not be a limit to the development of these seven qualities. We get a sense of that potential when we meet great teachers who have developed these qualities extensively.

I mentioned the other night the Thai teacher Ajahn Jimnian, who has come to Spirit Rock many times and I'm sure we'll have him again. He was a great concentration prodigy when he was a child, but he also has a lot of insight and has developed his mind through Vipassana as well as Samatha practice. He said once, a few years ago, when talking about the development of his own heart and mind, that he hasn't had any anger in 25 years. And it seemed like that when you met him. That's a great development.

The other teacher that impressed me greatly in this regard was Dipa Ma. Dipa Ma was an Indian woman from Bengal who trained in Burma with great teachers there and then studied under Anagarika Munindra, Joseph's first teacher, for many years. By the time I met her, she was probably about 60. Her first visit to the United States was around 1980, and I got to spend a month looking after her when she came to Massachusetts.

I got to see her both in her teaching role and behind the scenes, and in both roles, she seemed the same. I was especially interested in watching her outside the meditation circle. She brought with her daughter, whose name is Dipa. Dipa Ma is just a name that means "mother of Dipa." So Dipa came, along with Dipa's son Rishi, who was four years old at the time.

Rishi was quite a little whirlwind when he was four. What was wonderful is we would take them out shopping in the nearby town and go through shopping malls because they wanted to buy clothes and sheets and bedding to take back to India, where you could get higher quality items here.

So we'd be going down the aisles of the department stores and Rishi would be kind of running out front, pulling hangers down. Clothes would be flying all over the floor, and it was generally just chaos in his wake. And then Dipa Ma would be running behind him, trying to put things right and hopefully slow him down—this little sixty-year-old woman in her white robes, flapping behind her as she ran down the aisle of the department store. And there was always a little grin on her face.

I thought, if she can laugh at trying to control a four-year-old in an American department store, that's good integration. Dipa Ma had that kind of unflappable quality.

And then in the Dharma seat, you got a sense of her tremendous inner strength. She's one of the strongest people I've ever known. Joseph Goldstein would sometimes go to visit her and she would say, "Oh, you look like you've been busy. I think you need to sit for a couple of days." But she didn't mean sit and walk and sit and walk. She meant sit down for two days and don't get up. That was her idea of sitting for a couple of days.

She was teaching at IMS one time in a fall retreat, and people were always struck by her presence. She had

a very strong emanation. So they asked her, "Well, what's in your mind?" They were trying to get a handle on it—what's going on in there? What's in your mind?

She said, "There are only three things in my mind. There's loving kindness, there's concentration, and there's peace. That's it."

That's a pretty beautiful mind. That's what she was like. She sort of radiated all those qualities. There's a lovely biography of her out that's just entitled *Dipa Ma*. And I found that women practitioners especially relate very strongly to her. We don't have a huge number of teaching figures—women teaching figures in this tradition—and she is a really wonderful one to relate to. So I really recommend that book to you all.

These are the qualities that we grow and can grow to a great extent. The Buddha made, as you know, a lot of lists. There are a lot of lists of the unwholesome qualities of mind. There are a lot of lists of the beautiful qualities of mind. But I would say for meditators, this is maybe the most important list of qualities of mind.

Of course, in the beginning, it's really important to get to know the hindrances, the list that Winnie talked about earlier last week. As the retreat progresses, you gain more facility at working with the hindrances, and those become a little less important as the retreat goes on. You start to move into these beautiful states of mind with more frequency.

And then the list that gives the best map of these beautiful states of mind for a meditator on this journey is the list of the seven factors of awakening. So I hope you will regard them as great tools on your journey. I kind of regard them as the meditator's best friend, because these are the forces in the heart and mind that will carry us to awakening, carry us to liberation. This is from the Buddha. They lead to awakening. Therefore, they're called factors of awakening. Very sensible.

I'll just mention what they are and then I'll talk about each of them in a little more detail. The seven are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. They are all described as maturing in release. That is, when we first encounter them in our practice, they're small growths. Our practice in the initial stages is dominated by the hindrance forces and especially desire and aversion. And as these factors of awakening come through, they're small in the beginning and they look weak. It's easy to overlook them.

But as we continue to cultivate them, they grow up and they grow stronger. And when they mature, their result is release or freedom or liberation. This is their function. It's their destination. This is from the Buddha also.

Investigation in the context of Buddhist meditation is more of a direct knowing, a kind of intuitive inquiry that happens through awareness itself. It's the quality of mind that wants to know experience more intimately, not through thinking about it, but through being present with it in a receptive, open way.

When mindfulness shows us what's happening—breathing, sensation, emotion, thought—investigation is the factor that leans in with interest. It's like the difference between noticing that there's a flower in the garden and actually moving closer to really see it, to know its texture, its fragrance, its particular way of being. Investigation brings that same quality of interested, receptive attention to whatever is arising in our experience.

This isn't an aggressive probing or an analytical dissection. It's more like gentle curiosity. When a sensation arises, investigation might notice: Is this sensation hard or soft? Is it changing or stable? What happens to it when I don't resist it? When an emotion comes up, investigation observes: Where do I feel this in my body? How does it move? What is its essential nature?

The Buddha sometimes described investigation as the factor that distinguishes between what is beneficial and what is harmful, what leads toward freedom and what leads toward more entanglement. So investigation has a natural wisdom to it. It begins to see the patterns of our experience, recognizing what brings suffering and what brings peace.

As this quality of investigation develops, it naturally energizes the mind. When we become genuinely interested in our experience, when we start to see the fascinating interplay of mind and body, of arising and passing away, energy begins to build. This is how investigation leads to the third factor of awakening, which is energy or effort—*viriya* in Pali.

This energy isn't the kind of striving effort that comes from willpower or determination, though those qualities certainly have their place in practice. The energy that arises from investigation is more like enthusiasm. It's the natural energy that comes when we're engaged with something we find genuinely interesting. Think of how you feel when you're absorbed in an activity you love—there's an effortless quality to the energy, a sense of being naturally drawn forward.

In meditation, this manifests as a willingness to stay present, to keep showing up for whatever is arising. It's the energy that sustains our attention through difficult moments and keeps us engaged during periods when practice feels routine or challenging. This energy has a brightness to it, a sense of being alive and awake to the moment.

Investigation emphasizes a non-conceptual awareness. The better way to think about it is that investigation draws our attention closer to our experience so that we can feel it more intimately. That's how we investigate—not by thinking about the experience, but by taking an experience like the breath and moving the attention closer to it so that mindfulness knows it better, knows it more closely, knows it in more detail, knows it more thoroughly, feels it more directly.

When this happens, there's quite a lovely movement that happens in the mind. We have a natural affinity for the present when we get interested enough to get close to something.

A simple example: I came up for tea tonight and got to the dining hall just before tea time. I looked up

toward the meditation hall and there was a small herd of deer grazing on the lawn out there. Further up the hillside, the late afternoon sun was casting those long shadows and that kind of golden light on the hills all the way up to the ridge. It was just a very beautiful scene.

Of course, our Spirit Rock deer are different. They're not like the deer in the rest of Woodacre. These are really cooled-out deer. What you'll notice is you can get fairly close to these deer, and they don't get afraid. I think it's the result not of genetic traits passed along—because we have deer at our house ten minutes from here who are spooked much more quickly than these deer—but of being around people who are peaceful, moving slowly, and non-threateningly.

There was this lovely group of six deer just grazing very slowly and meditatively out on the lawn. I was transfixed by the sight. I just stood at the entrance to the dining hall for a while, watching them because it was so beautiful.

When the interest is there, when the curiosity is there, the mind is naturally drawn to closer contact with what we're feeling or observing. It's a natural process.

Then you get a feeling for this other word the Buddha used a lot for the kind of attention we give in meditation. It's often translated as wise attention. I might rather call it careful attention. The Pali word is *yoniso manasikara*. *Manasikara* means attention. *Yoniso* is the Pali word being translated as wise, or, I would say, careful.

Now the root of this word *yoniso* is *yoni*. If you know Hindi or Pali or Sanskrit, this refers to the womb. So probably a more literal translation of this word is womb-like attention.

People sometimes criticize Buddhism for being too masculine or too patriarchal, but in the Buddha's elaboration of this very central kind of meditative attitude, he calls it a womb-like attention. What's involved in that image of being womb-like? The womb is embracing, sheltering, nurturing, and holding with care and love. This is the kind of attention we're asked to bring to our experience.

Mindfulness in its fullness is said to be without greed, hatred, or delusion—*alobha*, *adosa*, *amoha*. This word *adosa* literally means without hatred, but the Buddha often used this negative language to imply the beautiful quality of it. Within this womb-like attention, there's a sense of the absence of hatred, which is actually pointing to the presence of loving-kindness, the opposite of hatred.

I think of mindfulness as having intrinsically this warm, nurturing, womb-like quality that establishes an embracing kind of relationship with our experience. Investigation can deepen this relationship of mindfulness to the experience that we're with.

Investigation is one of the factors that can be strengthened very directly by your effort in the present moment. Let's look at some simple examples of that.

Let's say you're experiencing the breath and you want to heighten this feature of investigation. How could

you do it? I think James led a guided meditation the other morning that went through a few different ways to bring a greater sense of interest and investigation. I'll just mention a couple here.

One is that with every in-breath, there's a beginning, a middle, and an end. With every out-breath, there's a beginning, middle, and an end. Can you see each of those three stages in an in-breath and an out-breath? When you look to find them, you're heightening investigation and you're bringing the awareness closer to the object of the breath.

Here's another suggestion. Sayadaw U Pandita, who's a very demanding meditation teacher, would ask his students at the beginning of a retreat as they were first coming into relationship with the breath, a question like this: When you breathe in, can you notice three distinct sensations in that in-breath? And when you breathe out, can you notice three distinct sensations that are part of that out-breath?

In other words, we might think as we begin that an in-breath is one sensation. But if we look more closely, there are lots of sensations on an in-breath. An in-breath lasts a few seconds. Whether you follow it at the abdomen or the nose, you'll feel a lot of little dancing particles of sensing coming alive and passing away.

Moment by moment in an in-breath, moment by moment in an out-breath. So can you find and name three distinct sensations in an in-breath, three distinct sensations in an out-breath? And then he would say, "I want you to report them to me in the next interview. So you're really going to be on the spot in a few days." Believe me, you get motivated to look closely.

And then you would come back and report to him your three sensations. And then he would say, "Okay, next interview I want you to tell me one more that you haven't seen before." So again, one is motivated to look closely.

If we're investigating our emotions, we might look at three aspects of an emotion. The mood or coloring that it has in the mind—the way joy tastes different than contentment, the way that irritation tastes different than frustration. So look at the tone or the mood directly. Look at its expression in the body. If the emotion is strong, you'll feel it somewhere in the body. And the third is to look at what kinds of thoughts come with an emotion. Emotions tend to generate thoughts that are like them. So those are ways of investigating the emotion. Look at those three aspects of the experience and get close to each one.

This quality is one of the most direct expressions of the faculty of wisdom. We often talk about our practice as being, in the end, all about wisdom. It's really what we activate that enables us to understand our experience. And it's the understanding that frees us. Experiences come and go, but wisdom grows. And the more wisdom grows, the more we understand what's happening and the less we get caught. So wisdom is really the high person on the totem pole in Buddhist practice. It's the liberating factor. It's what we're really working toward.

But how do you activate it? What is wisdom? It's kind of an abstract concept. It's not conceptual either. It doesn't come from thinking about things. Insights are its expression, but insights are not always there.

They come when they come and they're not always there, and you can't force them by thinking about them. That doesn't work.

So how do we support or activate wisdom? Investigation is one of the most direct ways because we're asking the question, "Let me know more about what this experience is. Let me see more deeply into it. Let me understand it more thoroughly." So we're activating that wisdom factor immediately with the growth of investigation.

As you develop this quality of investigation, one of the things you'll notice is that it generates an even greater sense of interest in what we're experiencing. And with that greater sense of interest comes a kind of alertness. It's as if the mind wakes up. There's a brightness of energy and we want to look even more closely, and that kind of waking up quality and the added alertness that comes leads to the next factor, which is energy.

Investigation brings with it the arising of energy. Energy is a direct translation of the Pali word virya. But there are many translations of this word. None of them quite hit the mark. So let's talk around the word by the different translations. Another translation that's often used is effort. And then another popular translation is energetic effort, because people couldn't decide whether it's energy or effort, so they just shoved them together. Some of the other words I like to translate virya are courage, ardor, and my current favorite, enthusiasm. When we're enthusiastic about our meditation, we give energy to it. And that picks up our practice a lot.

From all of these, you'll get a sense of what's involved in virya. It is a kind of energy. It can be both of body and of mind, and you'll experience it both of body and of mind. It's the energy that keeps us awake and refreshed and coming to sittings. It's the energy that makes us want to look closely. But it's energy not in a random way—energy that's directed toward the path.

This quality reflects the very nature of mind itself. As the Buddha taught: "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."

This quotation illuminates both the direction and the attitude that underlies virya. The energy flows toward wholesome states, but there's something more—an unmistakable heroic element. Virya comes from the Pali root *vira*, meaning hero. This heroic quality is essential because the work of abandoning the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome isn't easy.

As you well know, unwholesome states carry tremendous momentum built through endless repetition of our karmic patterns. For years and years—perhaps lifetimes—these tendencies of greed, aversion, and delusion have gathered force behind them. When we enter into direct relationship with these patterns, we feel their impact again and again, moment after moment. Yet in the midst of this challenge, we must simultaneously develop wholesome qualities.

This is the great work of practice—anything but simple. Virya is the element in mind that enables us to return to this relationship moment after moment, transforming whatever unwholesome states we encounter into the beautiful qualities that represent our deepest potential.

The strength of virya depends largely on our level of motivation. None of you would have undertaken the work you have without strong motivation driving you forward. When I contemplate motivation, I find it helpful to look at other fields of human endeavor, particularly professional athletics.

Take tennis, a sport I've long been passionate about. I've played for years, love discussing it, watching matches on television, attending tournaments live. What fascinates me most are those who truly excel. Consider today's top players—Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. Their athletic conditioning is superb. They can spend five hours on a blazing hot court, running at full speed, battling each other with fierce intensity. Federer barely appears to perspire, while Nadal looks as though he could continue for five more hours without missing a beat.

Their physical conditioning is remarkable, and the financial rewards substantial—Federer's earnings likely exceed twenty million dollars. When Andre Agassi dominated the circuit, I read extensively about his training regimen. Living in Las Vegas—that desert city where heat dominates most of the year—he worked with a demanding coach from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. This coach would take Agassi into the hills surrounding the city, forcing him to run sprints up steep inclines in the scorching midday heat until Andre would vomit from sheer exhaustion. Only when he reached that point of complete depletion would his coach say, "Good, that's enough for today. Now you can shower."

This was Agassi's chosen path to the level of athleticism he sought. Yet of all the athletes who've impressed me with their dedication, professional cyclists remain the most extraordinary, especially during Lance Armstrong's era. Though he won the Tour de France seven times, what captivated me wasn't just his success but his mastery of one of the most grueling feats humans undertake.

The Tour de France spans nearly a month—July into August—crossing some of France's highest mountains, through the Alps and Pyrenees. Day after day for more than twenty stages, with only occasional rest days, these athletes must ride at maximum intensity against the world's finest competitors. They're literally riding their hearts out.

Lance once explained that his advantage came from an unusually high tolerance for pain. Every time he mounted his bicycle for a race, he knew he faced eight hours of unrelenting suffering. That was simply the nature of his chosen sport—what all cyclists at that level accept as their reality.

But consider: what drives such dedication? Fame and fortune, certainly. Yet how does this compare to the motivation for liberating the heart and mind?

That's like small stakes compared to what we're doing. But each of us is making that same kind of heroic effort in our way. Every time we come in here and we're willing to meet the physical pain or the restless

mind or the pain of the heart that may be years and decades old, we're exhibiting that same kind of heroic quality with our meditation.

Sometimes meditation encourages us to really take this heroism to our limit. I came on one three-month course during a year when the teachers were all practicing and studying with Sayadaw U Pandita, this demanding teacher from Burma that I mentioned, and they were teaching in his style. So we were told when we entered the retreat that we were expected to sleep four hours a night, not more, and we should be doing continuous mental noting for the twenty hours that we were awake.

I was a little taken aback because I was used to sleeping six hours a night in retreat. I could cruise pretty well at six, but I'd never tried to get down to four. And I did mental noting some of the time, but I had not been used to doing it all twenty other hours. So I thought, okay, this is the instruction, I'm going to do it. And then every day in the interview, my teachers would ask me, "How many hours did you sit, how many hours did you walk, and how many hours did you sleep?" So I'd have to keep track of that and report to them.

After many sleepy sittings and sleepy walkings and even sleepy standings, I did manage to get my sleep down to four hours a night. And then I found that I could cruise at that level. I mean, it was hard work, but the sleep was not a problem after a certain time. I'd go to bed at eleven, I'd get up at three, and I got kind of used to that rhythm. And then I did the noting practice very continuously in the other twenty hours.

I have to say it was one of the most fruitful periods of meditation practice that I've done. It was definitely the hardest, but I also learned a tremendous amount. Some things I don't think I could have learned any other way. So it was very valuable. It was a challenge to my level of energy. It was not easy. But now that I look back, I'm really glad that I did it. It was very fruitful.

So that's one model of viriya, of the heroic approach to practice. But there's another kind of viriya that is simply about perseverance. Energy that simply goes on and on and on will also reach the goal. So it doesn't have to be this most intense kind of all-out effort, but simply doing our practice steadily on and on and on will also reach the goal.

There's a great figure in Tibetan history named Milarepa, who I'm sure you've heard of, a great eleventh-century yogi who spent most of his time out in the wilds and caves, living on nettles, dressing very simply in a white robe and doing inner heat practice to stay warm. Milarepa had a couple of very famous disciples, Gampopa and Rechungpa, both of whom went on to found great schools in Tibetan Buddhism.

This story is about Gampopa. He was completing a period of training under Milarepa and had gotten lots of teachings, lots of empowerments, lots of transmissions, and was about to go off on his own and do his own solitary retreat. Very sad to leave his teacher, but he knew that he had to go off to do his practice. So he was taking his leave of Milarepa and started wandering down the mountain path to go off into his own

hermitage.

He got partway down, and Milarepa said, "Wait, come back." Gampopa came back. Milarepa said, "There's one more pith transmission that I want to give you." Gampopa was very curious, very eager. Oh, this is really the heart of it. So Milarepa turned around, he turned his back to Gampopa, flipped up the hem of his white robe and bent over, showed him his backside, which was described as being as hard with calluses as the hoof of a camel, and then said to Gampopa, "This is the secret of my success. Persistence in meditation is really what you need. I've only gotten to where I am by meditating with this kind of dedication. So as you go off, please also meditate with this kind of diligence to achieve your own success."

So just that carrying forth, carrying on. This is from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, the Burmese teacher we've mentioned a few times: "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."

Of this perseverance, Bhikkhu Bodhi had a really lovely comment in a book of his on the Eightfold Path, where he said, "In order to reach the goal, you only need two things. You need to begin and you need to continue."

And if you do those two things, the outcome is assured. That's the persistent quality of virya, just keeping going.

So as we make our effort, as we exert ourselves in this practice with this bright, alert energy, in time it brings the next quality, which is called rapture. The Pali term is piti. We use the term rapture because it's gotten somewhat standardized, but it's an odd word, isn't it? Do you use it much in everyday conversation? I hardly ever hear this word outside of religious context, so it's a little peculiar. But I think a better translation is something like rapt attention or joyful interest.

So this brightness that comes when the energy is there and we're making a connection to our meditation subject—we find a kind of joy in coming into relationship with it. In the beginning, say when we're with the breath or the body, it just seems like a lot of hard work. Doesn't seem like much fun. But as the interest rises, as the energy rises, over time this becomes a happy kind of activity. Our relationship to the object starts to light up with some kind of pleasure, some kind of enjoyment as we connect with it. And it's this enjoyment of the focus that is pointed to by the word piti or rapture. So we find that we like being where we're turning our mind.

In the beginning it seems like a lot of work and there are many things that are far more interesting, but at this point we like being there with the object. Even the breath, which seems very neutral and not particularly sexy, starts to seem appealing.

There's a teacher in Australia named Ajahn Brahm. If you follow Buddhist news, you will have heard of

him because he carried out an ordination of bhikkhuni in the Theravada tradition. I believe this was the first Western bhikkhuni to be ordained, to take full ordination, which means 254 precepts for a woman. It threw the monastic community into something of a tizzy because it was quite unorthodox. Ajahn Brahm wanted to make a strong statement, and he did so, and there have been follow-on ordinations of other women in the bhikkhuni lineage.

Ajahn Brahm teaches concentration practice on the breath. One of the phrases he uses to incline people to that practice is to tell them to look for the beautiful breath. When you can discover the beautiful breath in your practice—discover the beauty that is with the breath—then your mind will go there naturally, easily, in an unforced way. And this is the quality of rapture, piti.

It's a mental factor, born out of our relationship—the mind's relationship to the subject—but it's a quality that has physical expression. When people are describing rapture or piti, they'll often talk about the energy that comes in the body. It's an arousing factor and brings up energy in the body.

Classically, there are different descriptions. There's minor piti, which is a kind of trembling all over the skin. There's momentary piti, which is like a flash of lightning of energy in the body. There's showering piti, which is like waves of energy passing through. There's uplifting piti where the body feels very light, as though it could lift up and float away. This is the quality responsible for yogis being able to levitate.

Do you remember when Maharishi Mahesh Yogi used to teach levitation? They'd go off into those retreats in Indiana—everybody who wants to come levitate, come for a meditation retreat. I was very skeptical about those retreats, especially about the advertisements. But I met someone this summer who was on those retreats, and she said many people were bouncing across the hall because they had learned to lift. They couldn't quite sustain it, so they'd come back down, but they were moving under the power of this kind of piti. The Buddhist texts also describe this phenomenon, so this is what's responsible for levitation.

And there's an all-pervading rapture where it fills the body. Mostly, this is a pleasant experience. There's the joy of being with the object, and then as the energy comes up, there's a pleasurable quality to it. It's often paired with this word sukha. Descriptions of the jhana speak of rapture and pleasure filling the body and pervading the body.

But in the early stages, as the rapture gets strong, the energy is sometimes so strong that it's not pleasant. It can become a little too intense or even overwhelming at times, and its experience is uncomfortable. There's simply too much of it happening. This is the culmination of the arousing cycle of the seven factors of enlightenment.

That over-strong energy of piti is dealt with by the second half of the seven factors as they unfold. The pleasure in being with the object takes away much of the mind's restless movements to past and future out of either sense desire, because it's already pleasurable, or aversion, because the current experience is pleasurable.

So the mind starts to settle based on the likableness of this present moment experience of rapture. The mind discovers through meditation itself—not through external objects, people, or relationships—a source of pleasure and happiness. It finds its fulfillment to some extent here and now, just through the meditation. That cuts down many of the movements outward toward pleasure or in reaction through aversion. And so it begins to bring about a settling of the mind in the mind-body experience, a settling within ourselves.

This is the development of the next factor, the first of the tranquilizing factors, which is called calm. The mind isn't moving around so much, things start to calm down, and one's mind settles within the mind-body present. It is this deepening of calm that starts to modulate, starts to soften, starts to temper the piti energy if it's gotten too strong, if it's gotten a little too intense.

This experience of calm is not something that happens often in most people's daily life. When meditators come upon this, sometimes for the first time in practice, it's occasionally a little unexpected. A common reaction is, "This is not very interesting. This is kind of boring. I mean, look, a few days ago I was having a lot of strong emotions. I was really processing this old relationship that I hadn't come to grips with before. There was a big opening in the heart that was accompanied by a lot of pain, but a lot of release. The energy was up. It was really interesting. I had something to talk about in my interviews. And then that all sort of went away, and now, well, really, I have to tell you, I'm sorry, but there's nothing happening in my practice anymore."

This state of "nothing happening" is actually quite an interesting point because it's announcing the emergence of the quality of calm. And as you probably know, the Buddha said that the state of peace was really a pretty good place to be.

At first it may seem like it's not very interesting because the experience is fairly neutral. And boredom is basically an aversion to the neutral. We can deal with it in two ways: we can become more comfortable with the presence of the neutral, or we can heighten the quality of investigation to get more interested in what's going on. Boredom is basically a result of not looking closely enough to find interest.

We can work with it in either of those ways, but mostly we want to start to appreciate the sense of peace that is growing, that we're discovering, and let ourselves simply sink into it and let it continue to enlarge. If we just accept it and settle, it will continue to enlarge by itself.

Then it leads into the next of the factors, which is concentration. Concentration, you remember, is this quality of collectedness of mind. So calm comes as we start to find some fulfillment within. Concentration comes as we deepen that willingness to let go of the mind going out and come more and more to collect the energy in the present moment in our experience of mind and body.

This experience of concentration brings a certain quality of strength into the mind. As you've discovered as you've been exploring it here on the cushion, when we sustain our attention in the present moment for

a while, there's something that feels really solid in our awareness. It feels like it's not so easy to be shaken by a passing thought, by a mood, or even by a pain in the body—a much greater steadiness of attention even as things are changing around us.

The strength of this quality of concentration is important. In the years before we built the retreat facility here, this hall and the residences, this side of the road and the hillside on the other side formed a kind of natural amphitheater. Once every year or two, we invited Thich Nhat Hanh to teach here. We built a platform for him on the other side of the creek that was high enough that people could see him, and then we would all sit in this natural amphitheater on the ground and his voice would be amplified. We would have 1,500 people here for a day of teaching from him.

It was quite extraordinary—his presence in this setting. He has such stillness of body and slowness of speech that it was as though his stillness cast a spell over the whole 1,500 people on the hillside. The spell that he cast was of concentration. Just by his presence and tuning into it, everybody there just settled in, and the whole crowd became very quiet. There's a photo of him taking almost a thousand people from that day for a walk up the road to the end of the path in those two meadows—silent walking meditation. It was very beautiful.

Concentration has two major benefits. One is that it brings with it a sense of wellbeing. The quality of peace and the sense of self-sufficiency just feels great. In some ways, it's what we're looking for through meditation—it's one piece of what we're looking for.

The other great benefit is that when the mind gets still, that is the best foundation for insight to arise. When the mind's moving all over the place, we can't see so clearly. It's like you're on a merry-go-round, spinning round and round and round, and a friend comes up with a newspaper and holds it in front of you and says, "Can you read it?" No, because you're going by too quickly. But as the merry-go-round slows down...

You come to a halt in front of your friend, and then your friend says, "Now can you read the newspaper?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what does the newspaper say?"

"It says life is change. If you hold on, you suffer. There's not really any self there in the first place. So just let go."

It's concentration that lets us read the news and understand that's the way things really are.

As we develop this sense of stillness and steadiness, the mind gets stronger. All the changing movements of pleasure and pain that normally create stirrings in our mind—our human situation basically is we're stirred up by greed and aversion in reaction to the passing show of pleasure and pain. That's the whole problem. As the mind gets stronger, the passing show of pleasure and pain doesn't make so much impact.

And when it doesn't make so much impact, those things actually get less significant. They don't stir us as much. We don't have to care about them as much. And we find that the mind can stay in balance even as the passing show goes on.

This is the last of the seven factors called equanimity. Equanimity is no longer being so moved by the changing factors of pleasure and pain. Equanimity is a very high state of the conditioned states that we can develop. It's the last of the seven factors of enlightenment. It's the last of the ten paramis. It's the last of the brahmaviharas. And it's the last stage in the progress of insight described in the Visuddhimagga before awakenings. You might say that equanimity is the closest conditioned state to the unconditioned.

So this is the culmination of the seven factors of awakening. When all of these are brought together and in balance, then the mind has this alert stillness that's really poised either for good mundane insight or for supramundane insight, for the opening to the unconditioned.

Let me close with two quotations from the Buddha:

"Because 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."

"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 their minds in the foundations of mindfulness, and by cultivating the seven factors of awakening in their true nature."

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

Thank you for listening.

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