Factors of Awakening

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:50

We talked the other night about the difficult states that come and bring suffering into our hearts and minds, and also about the beautiful states that we can open to and discover within us. The Buddha, of course, made a lot of lists of both.

On the side of suffering, you're probably familiar with lists like the hindrances, the fetters, and the taints. He talked a lot about these as ways to understand how we suffer and the deep roots of our suffering. But he also talked about just as many, if not more, wholesome qualities—beautiful qualities of mind. He put these into lists as well: the Eightfold Path, the Five Spiritual Faculties, the Four Brahma Viharas, and others.

As we read the teachings and understand how the path works, we start to see that the heart of the path is to grow the wholesome qualities of heart and mind and reduce the unwholesome. That's really what meditation is all about, and insight as well. We see that the mind has so much potential in this way—that we can pick the kinds of qualities we want our minds to manifest. By practices oriented in those directions, we can shape the mind to be what we want it to be. Of course, it's still subject to impermanence, and it takes a lot of work and training to do that. But we can shape it in any of the wholesome directions that we choose. We can also shape it in unwholesome directions, but that's not recommended.

As an example of this shaping in a wholesome direction, there's a nun in Burma called the Metta Nun. All she does all day, every day, is loving-kindness practice for all beings. So you can be pretty sure that in the hours of daylight in Burma, somebody is sending you metta. It's a beautiful reflection. Imagine what her mind is like, having practiced metta day after day for years and years in her simple life as a nun. It's a beautiful inspiration to me. We can do that ourselves in whatever direction we want. We can shape our minds by our choices.

You may know this story from the Native American tradition that became popular around the time of 9/11, called the Two Wolves. The story goes that a boy comes home from school one day and talks to his grandfather about how he's been picked on by some other boys at school. It made him really mad, and he wanted to fight back and hurt them the way they had hurt him. He said, "Grandfather, what should I do?"

The grandfather said, "I know this very well because there are two wolves inside me. One wolf is angry and violent and wants to rage against injustice and hurt the people who have caused it. But the other wolf is peace-loving, loves harmony, wants to be friends with everyone, and doesn't want to give in to hatred. These two wolves are battling for control of my soul."

The young boy said, "Well, grandfather, which one will win?"

And he said, "The one that I feed."

I like this language because the Buddha used very similar language. The list that he talked about, particularly for meditators—and one that I don't say this very often, but I think this is worth memorizing—I think it would be good for you all to memorize this list and know it in your own experience in your meditation practice—is the seven factors of awakening, sometimes translated as the seven factors of enlightenment.

These factors of mind are a meditator's best friend. They will support you on your path and lead you to awakening. The way the Buddha described them is that by feeding these seven factors of awakening, we are starving the five hindrances. That is what leads to awakening or enlightenment. This image of feeding and starving is right there in the ancient texts.

The seven factors are usually described in the texts in a certain order because they have a sequential unfolding. They are: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. As the Buddha said, "They lead to awakening, therefore they're called factors of awakening." He described all of them as maturing in release or liberation. That's their destination. As they develop, that's where they take the mind.

"Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too, when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, she slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbana"—the term for the highest kind of freedom that's possible.

In developing these factors, they lead us in the direction of freedom and liberation. They also describe, when brought to maturity, the mind as it's poised for that moment of awakening. The understanding in our tradition is that the mind develops in a certain way...

And when it's in a perfect state of balance, as we'll see from these factors, it's ripe for opening to a glimpse of the unconditioned, nibbana.

That moment where the mind moves beyond the conditioned realm and contacts this unconditioned element called nibbana is what constitutes enlightenment or awakening in our tradition—in the Buddha's description, in our understanding.

So these are both the factors that lead to that awakening, and they also describe, when brought to maturity and balance, the mind that's poised for that movement, for that opening to the unconditioned.

The Buddha described them as sequential, so I'll describe them in that way. But we also need to understand that each one reinforces the others. You will experience them all along your journey, and they keep feeding back into one another, creating a circular quality as well. When you consider the whole path unfolding, there's a sequence that the mind goes through, and these factors illuminate that progression.

The reason we emphasize these factors is that you want to be able to recognize when they're present in your meditation. You want to know how they come into being and how they become strengthened. They're very wholesome in themselves, and even if the journey doesn't carry all the way to enlightenment, the development of these qualities will be pillars of your practice. Having them alive in your mind is the path of meditation—this is how we develop through insight meditation.

The first of these is mindfulness, which we've talked about extensively. It's been our practice throughout the week, and it starts the chain going. It's like when you have milk at the right temperature and add yogurt culture—it starts the whole transformation into yogurt. Mindfulness works the same way. You introduce the culture of mindfulness into your mind, into your practice, and it begins to unfold these other factors.

The next three factors are energizing—we call them arousing factors. The final three are pacifying or calming factors. That's the essential balance of the entire set. Mindfulness initiates them and also helps balance the energizing and pacifying factors. This describes the fundamental balance that this set of mental factors creates.

Essentially, we're aiming in practice for a mixture, a balance of energy and calm. You'll hear us in meditation instructions encourage you to find that mix in your body posture—find a posture that's relaxed (the calming piece) but also upright (the alert or energizing piece). The body expresses this balance we're developing in the mind.

We've talked extensively about mindfulness this week. Sally gave a complete talk on it a few nights ago, so I don't need to elaborate much. I want to leave you with what I consider the definition of mindfulness. You can read many books on mindfulness without finding a clear definition, so this is my personal understanding of what mindfulness is.

Mindfulness is the factor of mind that knows what our present moment experience is. Just that simple.

You could say mindfulness answers the question: What's happening now?

You can see that you can be in the present moment—like the thief, the rock climber, or the surgeon—but not be answering the question, "What's happening now in my experience?"

Consider a dog. Is a dog in the present? Almost all the time. Is a dog mindful? No. It lacks that self-reflective quality that can observe and note, "This is my present moment experience."

For instance, you open a can of food at 5:30, the dog's dinnertime. The smell emerges, and the dog immediately bolts to the dish. Does the dog ever think, "Oh, hearing, hearing. Perception of can opener. Rising of aroma—Frisky's meatloaf, associated with mealtimes. Pleasant, pleasant. Should I go to my bowl or not?"

No. The dog doesn't go through that process. The dog lacks mindfulness.

The baby is also very present, but hasn't yet developed this self-reflective quality. The baby is not answering the question, "What's happening in my experience right now?" But mindfulness answers that question.

You can see that it's a factor we can turn on or off in any moment. It's not that hard. Carol mentioned, "How hard is it to feel the touch of your hands?" It's not hard, but remembering to do it is hard. So this is mindfulness—a factor that has some wisdom, some intelligence in it, answering the question: What's happening now in my experience?

When we start to become mindful and pay attention to our experience, we lead directly into the next factor. We become interested. We become curious. We want to know what's there. When you start to wake up, you have this alert interest—especially in a place like this, but anywhere—this alert interest in what's happening in your experience. This leads to the second factor of investigation.

Investigation builds off the mindful connection and wants to look more deeply. It wants to know more deeply: What's the nature of this experience? We've talked in different ways about this factor of investigation during this retreat. There was a question earlier about using a life situation to inquire into and contemplate, and that can be appropriate and very useful in its own time and place.

The main thing I want to say about this factor of investigation is that primarily it's not conceptual. We're investigating our experience, and we don't need so many words to do that. To give you an example: when you're feeling your breath, if you want to know your breath more intimately or in more detail, do you have to think about it? Or can you just bring your attention closer to the sensations of breathing and feel it more deeply?

That's the way this factor of investigation is meant to work. It's meant to encourage us, based on mindfulness, to bring our attention right together with the thing we're experiencing and know it that intimately, so that the awareness and the focus come right together. Then we know it as closely as it can be known.

You can see this kind of attention coming naturally when you get interested in something. For instance, when you go by on your way to the dining hall and see the mother robin in that nest, isn't your attention just right there? There's not a forced effort in it, but the interest just draws you in to what she's doing. Or when you see the sun setting on Discovery Point and those rosy pink tones coming in, you just want to look. You want to be close to that experience. That's the factor of investigation.

We can assist this factor with some cues or questions. For example, if the breath is a good anchor for you, a way to get more intimate with it—more continuous and with more detail—is to see if you can experience with each in-breath the beginning, middle, and end of that in-breath. And if you can experience with each out-breath the beginning, middle, and end of the out-breath. See if you can sustain that recognition breath after breath after breath.

This does two things. It makes for greater continuity in the mindfulness, so there's less tendency to stray. And it allows you to perceive more detail in the experience. Because when you start to look that closely, you realize the in-breath isn't just one thing. We start by saying, "Just be with the in-breath"—okay, that's just one thing. You're with the in-breath. But when you look at beginning, middle, and end, you see there are lots of little sensations arising and passing, moment by moment, in the course of an in-breath. Same with the out-breath—many little sensations arising and passing that make up the out-breath.

In seeing this finer level of detail, you drop down and start to see the truth of impermanence that Sally talked about last night. It's not like the in-breath is one solid thing that lasts for a while. The in-breath is actually made up of very rapidly changing sensations, whether you're experiencing it at the belly or in the nose. As you look closely, you'll find that.

This kind of attention the Buddha described with a phrase that is quite lovely: *yoniso manasikāra*. It's usually translated as "wise attention," but the meaning is more poignant than that. For those who know a little about Indian culture, *yoni* is the word for the female organ and *lingam* is the word for the male organ. If you go around to Hindu temples, you'll see lots of representations of lingams and yonis because they're sacred in Hindu worship.

So *yoni* we could translate here as "the womb." *Manasikāra* means "attention." *Yoniso manasikāra* literally means "attention that's like the womb." It's not like a cold, clinical, detached, microscopic observation. It's the way that a womb supports the baby growing inside it—nourishing, embracing, and supportive.

So that's the quality of attention that we want to bring into this investigation. Sally used the phrase "kind attention" in describing mindfulness, and this term yoniso manasikara really unfolds that meaning. This is how we become more familiar with our experience—by becoming very intimate with it and embracing it with this kind of nourishing and caring attention.

We discussed this approach briefly when we talked about emotions. When you want to understand an emotion well, you bring your attention to the experience in the body. You look for the flavor in the mind or heart, and you notice what thoughts are associated with it. Again, you're getting to know the emotion in all the different ways it manifests by coming very close. When we understand it in that way, we see how it's put together and we're not so enchanted or deluded by it. We understand its makeup because we've looked at it so closely and carefully.

This factor of investigation emerges from what you might call the wisdom aspect of mindfulness. People often ask, "How do I bring wisdom into my meditation? How do I awaken that factor?" Investigation is the premier way, the direct way, because you're opening up the aspect of curiosity and wanting to understand as you look more closely and investigate to feel more directly. You're directly awakening the wisdom faculty.

In concentration practice, investigation is not that important a feature. Concentration practice is designed

simply to still the mind. One of my teachers, Pauk Sayadaw, who's a master at concentration practices, told me, "Don't investigate while you're doing this practice—it disturbs concentration." He was referring to the deepening of stillness, basically saying to turn off the investigation faculty. But for vipassana practice, where the whole purpose is to awaken wisdom, the investigation faculty is key. You want to have it alive and growing.

This aspect of interest and curiosity naturally brings up the next factor in the sequence: energy. When you're interested in something, you get energized, don't you? It brings about physical energy and mental energy, and that's the next of the seven factors.

This is not just random energy, however. It's energy directed toward what you could call the path. Sometimes the word used here is "effort"—the kind of effort toward the accomplishment of the path. If you put the two together and think of it as energetic effort, that's a nice way to hold this factor.

The word in Pali is virya, and it carries deep connotations because the word vira, which is the root of virya, means "hero." You can think of a hero or heroine arousing great energy to carry out a really difficult task. This word vira shares the same root as the Latin virile and the English word "virile," which has its root in Latin—the same root as the word "hero."

When you put all that together, you get the sense that this factor of virya, which we're translating here as energy, could equally be effort, energetic effort, ardor, enthusiasm, courage, or determination. It encompasses all those aspects of giving yourself wholeheartedly to the work of meditation that you're carrying out.

This is how the Buddha described it: "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." I hope you can sense the heroic quality of this undertaking. It's what all of you have been doing day by day in being here.

I mentioned the other night all the wholesome qualities that you've all been generating and working on during these days—the moment-by-moment practice. This virya really demonstrates that: the moments you've created of mindfulness, of loving-kindness, of patience, of determination, of wisdom, of courage. These are all summed up in this quality of virya—the moment-by-moment effort as we confront the difficulties in the mind, the emotions, the kilesas, and transform them into wisdom and compassion. That's a heroic journey.

Now, the degree of virya that we bring to this path depends on our level of motivation, which depends on our inspiration and our understanding of what we're doing here—what the path is about and what it means to us. There are many gradations of motivation among practitioners.

Some people find the path and go into a cave for twelve years, like Ani Tenzin Palmo. I don't know if you've read her story—she's an English woman who ordained in the Tibetan tradition and literally spent

twelve years in a cave in India practicing. That's the outcome of great inspiration and motivation.

You see this in other fields too—people doing incredible kinds of training. I just read an article about a Kenyan athlete who won the marathon in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The kind of training he went through was unbelievable: twenty-four-mile runs almost every day, climbing very steep hills as part of that routine at high altitude, so that when he came down to Beijing near sea level, he would be tremendously conditioned.

from his high-altitude training. Week after week, year after year, he maintained this rigorous schedule to stay in championship condition. I believe he set a world record time winning that Beijing marathon.

My particular sports obsession is tennis, and I'm drawn to the generation of the Sampras-Agassi rivalry. Andre Agassi used to train in Las Vegas with Gil Reyes, an athletic coach at the University of Nevada. Reyes was this big, strong, inspiring figure who would take Agassi into the hills of Las Vegas in the middle of summer and make him run uphill until he vomited. That was his training regimen. Once he threw up, he could call it a day, go home, and have an energy drink.

People do these incredible things merely for money and fame—they're not even trying to get enlightened. Imagine the energy we could put into spiritual practice.

One teacher in our circle who emphasized this energy factor most strongly was Sayadaw U Pandita, a Burmese master and Dharma heir of Mahasi Sayadaw. While Mahasi had many successors, U Pandita took over his main monastery in Rangoon and was a true Dhamma warrior. Though I didn't practice with him personally, Carol did and survived to tell the tale—we bow to her endurance.

Sayadaw U Pandita expected practitioners to maintain twenty hours of daily practice with only four hours of sleep. I began a three-month retreat when several teachers were studying with him and teaching in this format. Joseph and Sharon at IMS were practicing this way, and that became their instruction to me: practice twenty hours a day, sleep four.

I didn't think I could manage it, but during daily interviews they asked how many hours I'd sat, walked, and slept. There was no escaping the accountability. So I kept working at it until I actually achieved four hours of sleep nightly with mindful practice filling the rest. It was tremendously powerful—an experience I treasure, though I don't practice quite so intensively now. I'm a bit older, perhaps gentler, but I'm grateful I undertook that training when I had such energy and fervor.

However, effort need not be so extreme. It can simply mean perseverance—just continuing. I love this quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great modern scholar and translator: "There are only two requirements for reaching liberation. One is that you start, and the other is that you continue. Then the outcome is guaranteed."

This we can all do. We can start and continue, and liberation will unfold.

Consider Milarepa, perhaps Tibet's most revered yogi from the eleventh century and ancestor of many Kagyu masters. Though his teacher Marpa gave him considerable hardship, Milarepa eventually integrated all the teachings and retreated to practice alone in remote mountain caves for years. He's said to have attained the highest realization within one lifetime through pure dedication.

You'll recognize him in Tibetan art by his simple white cotton robe. He mastered tummo—inner heat generation—enabling him to survive mountain winters. Legend says he lived on nettle broth, which sometimes gave his skin a greenish tint in paintings.

Milarepa had two famous disciples: Gampopa and Rechungpa. When Gampopa had received all necessary instructions and started down the mountain path to find his own retreat cave, Milarepa called him back, saying he had one final pith instruction. When Gampopa returned, Milarepa turned around, lifted his white robe, and showed his buttocks—callused as hard as camel hooves from years of sitting in meditation.

And then Milarepa said to Gampopa, "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 like this. You must also give rise to such heartfelt perseverance." So just the power of continuing is so important. It's all we need to do.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who I think we've mentioned a few times, who Carol has sat with in Burma and Sally and I sat with on the East Coast, puts this in a beautiful way also. I'd like to read you his words: "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 we have energy in our practice, as you may have felt this afternoon, things become very vibrant and alive. And when things become alive, it's satisfying in some way. It creates a kind of happiness in our experience. That leads to the next factor in this sequence, which is called rapture.

Rapture is a translation of the Pali word piti. I think rapture is actually a rather unfortunate translation because it has so many connotations from the Christian fundamentalist viewpoint. It denotes a state of intense ecstasy and self-surrender that isn't necessarily captured in the word piti. It's somewhat over-dramatized. Perhaps better translations would be "delighted interest" or "joyful attention."

Piti refers to this quality when the meditation starts waking up and you begin to really enjoy being with your object—whatever it is, whether it's the breath or the sounds of nature or the sight of the robin or the ease that might come in your body as you relax. It's finding delight in the meditation itself. This is a special kind of joy. It's not like getting joyful because you're thinking about the new raise you're going to get when you go back to your job at the end of the retreat. It's not that kind of joy. It's a joy in the present moment

arising from the meditation itself.

In this enjoyment with the object, we find it's where we want to be. It's not forced anymore. We're not having to apply tremendous effort to stay with it. There's this growing pleasure in being with the object, being in the moment. A number of people have mentioned this quality of enjoyment coming into their practice during interviews, and that's the quality of piti or rapture.

This is generally a very pleasant experience—indeed, one of the synonyms is joy. But it's often accompanied by physical expressions because the energy has preceded it. The physical expressions can manifest as momentary jolts of energy, a sense of showering energy that starts from above and flows through the body, or all-pervading energy where the entire body feels alive with this flowing energy. Sometimes the degree of energy can be a little too strong to be pleasant, and it turns into somewhat of a burden—this physical manifestation of the factor of piti.

When that happens, it's something to discuss with one's teacher. The encouragement is simply to stay with it, not to back off from the process that has brought you there. Just bear the energy for a while, because as the practice continues, it starts to smooth out. The rapture becomes less burdensome as the meditation continues to deepen.

Essentially, one has discovered a happiness that comes from the mind's relationship to its own experience. This provides a gateway to the next factor in the path, which is calm. The happiness has entered the meditation and we stop having to look outside so much for our satisfaction or fulfillment. The fulfillment begins to arise through the inner experience of the meditation. As that happens, this searching, questing, craving, longing that keeps us stirred up—all of that starts to settle, because the fulfillment has been found internally.

This quality of calm is the next factor. Now we're moving out of the energizing factors—the three energizing factors of investigation, energy, and rapture—into the calming factors, and this is the first one. The experience of calm begins to arise, and we feel it both in the body and in the mind.

It's significant that we feel it in the body. Often when we come into meditation, the body is something of a jangle of nerves. We've accumulated tremendous tension through the overstimulation of our culture and the overwork of our particular society.

And so we come in and the body is often vibrating with too high an energy level that it's accumulated and hasn't known how to release. So as the calm starts to settle, it's felt through the body as well. The body can really relax, maybe for the first time.

This word in Pali is passaddhi, for the calm, and it's sometimes translated as relaxation. It's almost like for the first time now the body can really let go and settle down and relax. So then we can come more and more fully into this present moment with a sense of peacefulness, both mentally and physically.

Thoughts are not stirred up as much as before. It doesn't mean they stop, but they're coming at a more leisurely pace. Because the body is calming and relaxing, there's not as much pain in the body. And the calming also means that the kind of flood of difficult emotions has slowed down quite a bit.

The feeling is like we've crossed this stormy ocean and we've come into a safe harbor. There's a sense: I just want to rest in this safe harbor. There's this beautiful poem by Emily Dickinson that points to this. This is an excerpt from a poem of hers called "Wild Nights":

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

That's a little bit of what it feels like. We can float on this place of calm. "Rowing in Eden" is a sense of having arrived in this safe harbor. It's only temporary—this is not the end of the road—but it's a very nice turning of a corner, a nice discovery.

We find that this peace and ease has always been available to us, but we've been stirring it up with our own reactivity. And now we've found a way not to stir. We find it's always available when we're not stirring.

There's this beautiful meditation instruction from Ajahn Amaro, who's an English monk and now the abbot of Amravati Monastery in England. At a certain point in a retreat, he'll give this instruction. This is the only instruction he'll give in a morning session:

Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of the mind and body. And then notice what disturbs it.

That's it. Once we discover there is this access to peace and ease, we can simply rest there. This is a really satisfying thing to discover, that this is possible for us, because in a way, it's part of what we've been looking for all along. I think there is a really deep longing for peace in our life. And this is the corner in turning in meditation where we discover it.

Sometimes it's not so striking in the beginning. People will be going along, having had a few days of settling in, a little bit of turbulence, and then they'll come to an interview and report, "Well, there's really nothing going on now. I was really restless for a few days and my body was aching. My body feels okay now. There's really not much going on. I'm sort of sorry to report this, but there's not much happening in my practice."

So I'll ask them, "Well, is it basically peaceful?"

"Oh, yeah, it's pretty peaceful. But there's not much going on. It's basically calm. Yeah, but it's kind of boring because there's nothing happening. I thought I'd have more emotions to purify and process."

It takes a little bit of time to realize the importance, the significance of this. Because we're often so accustomed to intensity, big highs and big lows, when those go away and the experience takes on a little bit of a neutral feeling, we don't quite know what to make of it. Sometimes an element of boredom comes in: nothing happening.

This is like the first touch of calm. It may seem boring because for once the experience is kind of neutral. It's not insanely great and it's not crazy bad. And we're not used to that neutral. Boredom is basically aversion to the neutral. But when we can see this, oh, there's some potential here.

You know, the Buddha said peace and calm were pretty good things to develop. And this is just the beginning. So trust in that and let yourself go into it.

There's a cartoon that sums up this state of perhaps disappointment. It's a Gary Larson cartoon about two Zen monks sitting in a zendo. One's a little older and one's a little younger. The older monk is leaning over and whispering something to the younger monk, and the caption says, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

That's sort of this stage of just beginning to touch the calm. But we need to have the trust that this is actually a really wholesome unfolding and just to rest in it. You don't need to do anything with it. You don't need to try to pump up the calm either. You just need to trust and rest in that.

One of the Buddhist statements that I really like in relation to this is the comment that peace is the highest happiness. Generally in Western culture, I don't think we believe this. I think we generally look for something more intensely pleasurable, some kind of high that's higher than just peace. And we think that's the highest happiness.

The Buddha said really clearly, peace is the highest happiness. And I think this is an important lesson in human psychology. This is truly what satisfies—finding the access to peace. As we really start to feel it and trust in it, we start to open the door to contentment. We don't have to run around outside looking for more things, looking for special experiences, looking for intense highs or gratification. We start trusting in the fact we can just rest in this peace, which is always available when we don't disturb it.

We also discover that it's possible to encourage this peace. In the Anapanasati Sutta, which describes the meditation on the breath, the Buddha has these very nice lines: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe in tranquilizing the mental formation." And same for breathing out. So we find we can use the breath to bring about this factor of tranquility or calm in both mind and body.

As we settle into this calm and trust in it and let go of so many other wrong kinds of effort and craving, then the mind starts to collect within itself. It's as though we can just let the mind drop into our experience of—you could say—the whole body. And as it drops in that way, it starts to collect, come together and unify.

This is the next factor in the sequence, which is concentration. Concentration is the translation of the Pali

word samadhi. And again, it's not a very good translation because in English, concentration means I'm going to take a narrow focus. Don't distract me with anything else. You know, I want to focus on my timepiece here and read the luminous dial. Don't distract me with any questions about tomorrow.

Samadhi doesn't have this sense of exclusive focus. Samadhi refers to the mind that has come together, which could happen from a narrow focus like the breath, but it could also happen from a very broad focus like sounds. So samadhi is this unification of mind where we've basically given up these jumps into past and future, into analyzing and rehearsing and planning and all that extra movement. We've let go of all that. The energy is collecting naturally through the power of calm into the mind and body coming together.

And we find when that happens, the mind feels different. It feels stable. It's not swayed so much. It's not so restless. It feels steady. We can stay in touch with the present moment, moment after moment for extended periods of time. It has a sense of well-being. It feels good when that happens. And it feels strong. By recollecting all this energy that we've been sending out, the mind discovers its own natural strength. And this is a great feeling.

There's a mistaken kind of understanding that concentration comes from a lot of effort. And I think maybe Sally mentioned this the other night. It's not about efforting.

The proximate cause of concentration is happiness. So again, it simply points to this relaxing within, trusting the sense of well-being and letting that collect all our energy.

Concentration offers two key benefits. First, it feels good. The mind feels strong, peaceful, and capable of accomplishing things—it provides access to peace. As the Dalai Lama teaches: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." Samadhi forms a fundamental component of this inner peace.

The second great benefit is that concentration leads to insight. When the mind is restless and moving all over the place, it cannot see clearly. Driven by craving, restlessness, and aversion—all those factors Carol described that blind us to clear seeing—it lacks the stability for genuine understanding. As it settles and collects and we turn our attention somewhere, we begin to see things as they truly are.

Imagine we've been riding on a merry-go-round, seated on one of the horses going round and round. One of our friends stands beside the platform holding up a newspaper, but we're moving by so quickly we cannot read it. The merry-go-round just keeps going, going, going. With samadhi, however, it begins to slow down. It slows and eventually stops in front of our friend holding the newspaper. Then we can read it, and it says: "Life has changed. If you hang on, you suffer. The way to peace is letting go." Then we get it. Insight comes when the mind is still—we can understand and let go.

This quality of concentration can be developed to extraordinary degrees. The Buddha taught that the range of the concentrated mind is one of the imponderables—one cannot even reflect on the possibilities

of a concentrated mind. Such development leads to states of deep absorption called jhana and even to psychic powers. But for us, well-being and insight are enough.

When the mind has become strong in this way, that concentrated mind is not so easily moved by the passing experiences of pleasure and pain. This leads to the seventh factor: equanimity.

Equanimity refers to a mind that is not disturbed by the transitory fluctuations of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Normally our minds are spent being rocked by the jolts of pleasure and pain, creating that sense of restlessness and instability. When the mind becomes concentrated, its strength provides stability in the face of these movements of pleasure and pain. This stability expresses itself through the mental quality of equanimity—meaning we are not disturbed by the momentary flows of pleasant and unpleasant.

For a long time, I thought equanimity meant not feeling. I imagined it meant becoming emotionally shut down because nothing mattered or moved you anymore. But this was a complete misunderstanding. In fact, in the early part of my practice, I tried to emulate what I thought that goal was, ending up repressing my feelings in ways that were not helpful at all.

What actually happens is this: as you discover this quality of equanimity, you find there is a kind of ease and balance in being with the waves of life. I prefer the word "balance" even more than "equanimity" here. When we are in a state of inner balance, the heart actually opens much more easily to the beautiful emotions.

Consider your own experience this week. At times when you felt peaceful, balanced, and well, didn't your heart respond more easily with love, happiness, joy, and compassion? This is what equanimity points toward. We find this inner balance and feel—ah, the burden is off. When the burden lifts, the heart can respond.

So equanimity is not a dead, unfeeling, uncaring place at all. It is a place of great richness, depth, and openness. This quality of equanimity...

This quality of equanimity appears at the end of the seven factors of enlightenment. It's the culmination of the seven factors. It's also the last factor in the list of the paramis, the last factor in the brahmaviharas, and the last factor in this list from the Visuddhimagga called the Progress of Insight that describes the journey to awakening. It's the last in all these lists.

So I would say that it's the fruition in mundane terms of the path and the closest mundane mental state to the unconditioned. It's the best approximation to nibbana that we can make by our effort.

When we have developed all of these factors, something beautiful emerges. The mindfulness starts them. Investigation, energy and rapture pick the energy up. Calm, concentration and equanimity settle it. When these are in balance, there's the stillness of concentration and there's the alertness of energy and

investigation. The mind is in this perfect poise for meditation.

This is where meditation goes really well. It goes well from the point of view of feeling well-being and trust and confidence and happiness, and it's the platform for insight. From this point the mind can not only see into the three characteristics that Sally described last night, but also where it can, if the grace comes of that moment, open to the unconditioned, to that moment of enlightenment or awakening.

There's no way to force or make that opening by effort. All we can do by effort is to develop these seven factors and bring them into that balance and then rest there. And then grace can provide that opening into awakening.

I'll close with this quotation from the Buddha on these factors:

"Bhikkhus, these seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering. Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future—all will do so by overcoming the five hindrances, by firmly establishing their minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by cultivating the seven factors of awakening in their true nature."

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

These seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating.

Thank you for listening.

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