Seven Factors of Awakening - Part 1

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 58:01

Our practice is a dynamic living process. You might have noticed that out of this process, new ways of seeing and understanding emerge quite spontaneously. As this practice unfolds for us, we discover through clear observation a possibility of opening to and accepting new dimensions. These dimensions have to do with the way things are, rather than believing our thoughts and believing in the little stories we have going on.

Very clearly, we gradually become more comfortable in just being here, rather than endlessly trying to be someone else. We allow ourselves to be who we are. There's less of a wanting for something else. We meet the qualities of the heart and mind that represent the core, the essence of what this teaching is about, of what the Buddha talks about in various ways.

Tonight I have the pleasure to talk about some of the factors of the mind that lead to full awakening—factors of mind or heart that support the practice in a wholesome way. You can say they are our allies on the path. These factors are already present in us; nothing comes from outside. When we practice, and especially in an intensive retreat like this one, they begin to reveal themselves as we pay closer attention. We can notice how these qualities operate in our minds, how they can be cultivated as we move through life, as we are nurturing the practice here. This offers the possibility of integrating all the understanding, and that's the purpose: to live our life with more wisdom, more understanding, more openness of heart.

These positive spiritual qualities or wholesome states of mind are always present in one who is awakened. They are also qualities that, if we pay attention, we can cultivate and nourish, and they will fulfill our spiritual life.

So what are they? What are the qualities called the factors of awakening? You've probably heard the word enlightenment—factors of awakening or enlightenment. I like to use the word awakening because it really is about what the Buddha realized. He was an awakened being.

You might guess that mindfulness is part of the list. Mindfulness, of course, is present. Then there are three arousing factors, or we can say energizing factors: investigation or inquiry, energy—which includes perseverance, courage of heart, strength of heart—and joyful interest or rapture. Then there are three calming factors or stabilizing factors: tranquility or calm, steadiness of mind or concentration, and equanimity.

These three arousing factors and three calming factors need to be in balance. Tonight I'd like to talk about

mindfulness and the three arousing factors.

These mental qualities are present or absent in our meditation; they're not always accessible. What veils them? Very often there's the veil of greed, hatred, or delusion, or we can also say the veil of the hindrances. It's just a veil, and it's precisely these nurturing qualities—these factors of awakening—that enable one to see the hindrances for what they are, to see greed, hatred, and delusion for what they are. With these qualities of mind, we can meet the difficulties, the unwholesome states of mind, which progressively become less and less able to prevent us from seeing the truth.

None of these mental qualities are personal in any way, and that's what we see through the process. They don't belong to me. They don't belong to you. They're present due to certain causes and conditions.

What are they based on? The whole teaching is based on the Satipaṭṭhāna, the path of practice founded on the four foundations of mindfulness that we have offered, that you've been practicing. Nothing is secret here.

The first foundation is mindfulness of the body: body, breath, sensations, movements—everything that's tangible as you're going through your day. Then there's mindfulness of feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Third is mindfulness of mind—everything that is happening in the mind: thoughts, images, mental images, mind states, consciousness, the knowing. Finally, there's mindfulness of dhamma, the fourth foundation. Here, dhamma means phenomena—the nature of all phenomena. This also includes all the teachings: the Four Noble Truths, the Five Hindrances, many others, and among them the seven factors of awakening. We can be mindful of these specific qualities, being mindful of mindfulness itself, of the energy, the investigation, the calm.

The Buddha said, "Oh bhikkhus, if the four foundations of mindfulness are practiced persistently and repeatedly, the seven factors of awakening will be automatically and fully developed." That is why mindfulness, the factor of mindfulness, is so valuable and important.

And the Buddha is expounding how these seven factors ripen. This is from the Satipatthana Sutta:

Bhikkhus—which here you are, bhikkhus, yogis, you can say—on whatever occasion a yogi or a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as body, feelings as feelings, mind as mind, mind objects as mind objects, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world, on that occasion unremitting mindfulness is established in him. Abiding thus mindful, he investigates and examines that state with wisdom and embarks upon a full inquiry into it. In one who investigates and examines that state with wisdom and embarks upon a full inquiry into it, tireless energy is aroused. In one who has aroused energy, unworldly joy, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body and mind become tranquil. In one whose body is tranquil and who feels gladness, the mind becomes unified. He closely looks on with equanimity at the mind. This is how the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and matured, fulfill the seven factors of awakening.

So this is the process, the path that we are on.

It's also lovely to know that in the suttas, the seven factors of awakening are often offered by the Buddha himself, or even by senior monks like Sariputra, to monks who are ill—meaning that very often in the suttas you would have an ill monk, and this is the teaching that will cure the mind from the disease of the heart. So it's said in the suttas, so often, that when one hears these seven factors of awakening, the monk, the person who hears these teachings, simply cures. It's the end of the illness.

It's also said that the devas, the celestial beings, often visit the places where this particular teaching is taught, is offered. And why is that? It's said that the devas rejoice in knowing that humans—and it's rare—can have the precious opportunity to hear about these beautiful qualities of mind, and that one through these qualities can reach full awakening, full enlightenment. So you might want to look for the devas tonight. There's a real sense of rejoicing.

And I know for myself, when I received these teachings in Burma from Sayadaw U Pandita, usually he would take a month to give teachings on these particular qualities. It would really give a sense of uplifting of the mind because of the possibility of awakening.

So these seven factors of awakening, as you might have noticed, are offered in a particular order. And yet they're not completely separate one from another. It's easy to link them, one nurturing the other. It's possible that one is highlighted. And yet it's the balance of these qualities that is most helpful for us, so that we can reach Nibbana.

We begin with mindfulness.

You might think that you've heard enough about mindfulness. And yet it's important to realize that we can never hear enough about mindfulness, because it's truly difficult to realize its importance on this path to awakening. Here it has the role of standing on its own. It's the balancing factor. It's the cause for the other six to arise. So it has quite an important role. It's truly a favorite in the Buddha's lists, and for good reason: this is what led him to see the truth.

Just a few reminders about mindfulness. The first is that mindfulness is seeing clearly what is present, and it's a momentary experience which acts just like a mirror. It reflects only what is present—nothing less, nothing more. There's that sense of no interpretations, no comment, no reactivity, not even commentary about what is present. So it's quite a special factor of mind.

Often we may think, "Oh yes, I'm mindful." And if there is that little sense of commentary which is lingering, well, there's probably not a totally pure mindfulness that just reflects what is.

What allows us to know is the knowing quality. It's knowing the sound when we hear a sound. So there's, of course, the sound, and there's the experience. Hearing is happening, but we don't need to think about what is happening when we hear a sound. It's to pay careful attention—that careful attention meaning a

closeness of attention which reveals the knowing as well. And there's the experience of hearing.

So we cultivate that attention with an attitude of persistence. And what happens if we do so? Mindfulness just heightens the level of mindfulness. It is the factor that we need to care about, and it supports itself. If there's a sense of worry when you hear these words, you can drop the worry and just remember that it's about carrying the practice, supporting mindfulness. If there's support towards mindfulness, mindfulness heightens the level of mindfulness itself.

You don't need to ask yourself anything more when there's this quality of knowing, because then it could raise the level of the thinking mind rather than just being with what is. The secret here is that we need to do it from the moment we are getting out of bed to the moment that we're going to bed. And if possible—I know that I had a teacher saying—see if you can be mindful during your dreams. Are you mindful when you're dreaming? Can you remember? Are you aware?

And it happens that there are periods when the practice is carried with the factors of awakening, where yes, that quality of mindfulness was carried over into the sleeping time. And it's not an aim. Please don't make that an aim, because it really is not helpful. Yet it's every moment, in small ways—the action of taking the soap when we wash our hands, turning a knob, just one step, sitting on the toilet. You know, it's not less glorious to sit on the toilet than sitting in the Dharma Hall. And if we have that quality of mindfulness when we are in that moment, that's exactly the level of awareness through which we can sense how precious our practice can be.

Over time, there's an act of greater acceptance, of interest, which leads to non-identification. Less grasping, less attachment. The quality of mindfulness is seeing clearly what can happen when it's happening. And so what is the outcome of this? It's greater understanding, greater wisdom. And that is a momentary wisdom. It's not that we need to be mindful one moment and then we forget for an hour and come back. What happens is that it raises the commitment to waking up every moment. And therefore we do the best we can. It's out of this natural sense of beingness.

At the beginning of our practice, if we are not acquainted with the practice, it seems like it's a lot of doing. But after a while, there is a sense of resting in awareness, of resting in the present moment, just because the mind does appreciate. And you might have seen that at moments where you're really connected with what is happening—there's a greater peace in just being present and not so much the need for the mind to look for this or that, looking for distractions. We're kind of resetting the format of the mindset. And we're cutting the ties of the habitual tendencies. So to see for ourselves if there is that quality of interest, which is exactly what grows out of mindfulness—interest.

There's a story from my practice with Sayadaw U Pandita. One day he was trying to make me practice very diligently, and the question he asked was one that, if I asked you, it would be interesting so that you can hear the level of mindfulness that was asked of me. He asked me if I was missing any mind moments during the day. And in the snap of a finger, it is said something like 70,000 mind moments arise. So you

can just notice how demanding that was.

My response to him was, "I hope not." And this response didn't satisfy him at all. He said, "Out." That was the end of my interview. And I didn't feel very good at the end of that interview with this Sayadaw.

The next day I had an interview with another Sayadaw, who immediately reported the event and said that I had not quite given the answer that was expected. And so I had the wisdom to ask, "What was the question?" And he said, "The question was, are you missing any mind moments?" And the fact that I had replied, "I hope not," was very arrogant, was full of pride, because of course we're missing mind moments.

Instead of "any mind moments," I had heard through translation "many mind moments," and it changed everything. And so that Sayadaw said, "Sayadaw U Pandita feels you gave an answer that only an arahant, only a fully enlightened being, can give." Which of course didn't please Sayadaw U Pandita.

And it was a great lesson in humility. It really brought such a commitment to the practice. It raised the level of commitment—not to struggle or strive, but to care, to connect every single moment for greater understanding, not for any result, but just to fully give myself to the practice.

What Sayadaw was trying to say, or what I heard later on, brought a very valuable insight, an insight that has stayed with me during all these years. And that insight I'd like to share with you: we cannot understand what we don't connect with. We see the truth, or just what is happening in each moment, only when we relate in the most simple manner. And that is the quality that enables one to see the truth—the simplicity. It's establishing that very direct connection of a simple path, a simple step, one breath at a time, one sensation, one thought, in this very moment. This is what reveals the truth. And so often it means cutting through that layer of interpretation. That's extra.

This leads us to the second factor of awakening, which is investigation or inquiry. These two are totally linked—that's the wisdom aspect. It's mindfulness with wisdom that emerges as we're being mindful in the way that I just expressed. It gives us a penetrative way to see through the concepts, to see through our ideas. And then we can refine so many subtleties.

That level of interest or inquiry has one quality to it, and the quality is that we don't think we already know what we're seeing. In the preciousness of the practice, because of the time that we have here—and it's long days at times—there can be a sense that we've already seen whatever it is that is presenting to us so many times, ten thousand, ten million times, and so we're not truly interested. And the investigation suffers from that idea, that lack of freshness, lack of curiosity.

So, to remind ourselves that we are explorers and that every moment counts. If there's that freshness in the mind, it will raise the willingness to look more closely. Just like tonight—I live at the Forest Refuge, and I was coming through the forest. It was already pretty dark, and suddenly the flashlight went out. No more batteries. And I was in the middle of that forest, and I thought, "Whoa, that's interesting." The mental factor—because probably, you know, I had been working on the talk—was there. It wasn't fear, it wasn't

anger or whatever, or it could have been any mental factor, but it was just like the mental factor of interest was present. And it was, "Oh, this is interesting." That's the first thing that came to my mind. And then I thought, "Oh, Marion's going to be behind me. I'll be okay. She'll have a flashlight."

But to be okay with the unknown, to settle in that presence of inquiry, investigating how it feels, and to bring to mind if there is this sense of boredom or laziness or lack of interest—to bring this phrase: "Do I know this? Can I be here?" That's why the Zen tradition speaks of beginner's mind. If we had nothing that we knew about sitting, can you imagine if you were here and you'd be experiencing your very first sit? That quality of mind would be one of interest. It doesn't mean that there would be no pain, but at least that motivation would be here.

So what is the quality of intention here? What it brings towards mindfulness and wisdom, which is also called wise attention, is to not only see through the concepts, but we meet the three characteristics of existence that we've been talking about. The quality of investigation shows us, in the light of illuminating what's in the dark, we move from ignorance to wisdom through lowering the feeling of confusion, of ignorance, and highlighting the reality. And the reality is that everything is impermanent. We see this very directly.

I was practicing in Burma, and the days there are quite long. There's three to four hours of sleep a night. You begin practice around three in the morning—wake up at three, and practice starts there. And then ten at night is the end, so it might be ten, ten thirty, eleven. So there is a lot of dedication to sitting and walking. In a walking period, I noticed that as I was clearly feeling the sensations and trying to be very aware of bodily sensations, there was a sense of not truly connecting. What I had not seen is the quality of the mind with which I was being with the sensations. And that's what we have been talking about, which is attitude.

What is the attitude of the mind? The sensations were known, and yet there was a sense of lack of connection, of not truly meeting the experience of sensation. When I highlighted that moment and asked, "What's the attitude?" I discovered that the mind was colored with boredom.

To see that boredom, I moved away from bodily sensations and noticed what was happening in the mind. As soon as I highlighted the boredom—as awareness was showing boredom—boredom got interesting. That was totally amazing in that reality of that moment. It suddenly shifted, changing the whole experience. So it's not about what the experience is; it's the quality of the mind.

Then I came back, connecting with boredom. And that went away; I was again aware of the bodily sensations. Because the openness of the mind was strong, there was another layer that came up, and the thought was, "Oh, I hate being bored." This "I hate being bored" was clearly a manifestation of aversion in the mind. To highlight that: What is the quality of the mind then? What does aversion feel like in that moment? See how momentary this is? Really, uniquely, very close to the experience. How does aversion feel? Immediately as I noticed aversion in the mind, there was tightness in the legs. And that revealed

another exploration. The practice, the process, was alive.

In each moment that we're truly connecting, there's a uniqueness not only to the practice but to our whole life. We're fully awake, seeing the birth and death of each experience arising and passing away—that sense of impermanence truly revealing that there's nothing we can hold on to. And yet, can we go with the flow of the river? If it's not one experience, there's another one that will appear, that will come. This raises that level of investigation.

What it reveals, too, out of that sense of impermanence is seeing that because it's changing all the time, there's nothing that is truly satisfying. No experience, even if it's wonderfully pleasant, stays. So there's nothing we can say, "Okay, I can hold on to this, clinging." Then another experience is going to change.

This process reveals that it's not personal. And that's the third of the characteristics. It's not my pain. It's not my aversion. It's not my boredom. It's the nature of Dhamma to reveal itself—mental and physical phenomena, and the play of that life process. One moment physical will reveal the mental quality; one moment mental quality will reveal the physical. It's the play of this mind and body process that allows us to see the nature of experience, the nature of awareness, the nature of knowing. And it's that which frees the mind from grasping, from holding on when it's pleasant, from pushing away when it's not pleasant.

This is a very enlivening process. When we are connected—and I'm sure you've had moments when we are connected—we do feel that it's flowing. There's not much resistance, not much wanting or pushing away. It inspires us to continue. When we don't have those moments of connection and we lack inspiration, we can remind ourselves of the Buddha's determination. I often call forth as a refuge his great determination to see the truth. Can you imagine that he did this alone? It's incredible. He had teachers to a certain extent, but the process of revealing the letting go of clinging—he had to find it himself.

I don't see any other quality than his total determination, courage of heart, and persistence of effort to see the truth. So one can take refuge in the Buddha if one feels inclined to, when those moments arise where there is a lack of interest, where boredom kicks in.

The energy or perseverance that I talked about is the second factor of awakening, the second energizing factor—the courageous strength of heart. And it's when things are difficult that we need to have more of this courage of heart, this energy. The Dalai Lama consistently reminds us that the places that hurt us more are where we need to look, because they are the places where we can find freedom. They're the most interesting, he says. And it's this tireless energy, born out of non-reaction, that allows us to accept more and more, to open more and more to those difficult places.

Dipa Ma—I think Friday night Rebecca mentioned her name—was an extraordinary teacher and yogi. And she says, "Nothing can prevent you from seeing the truth. Absolutely nothing. Everything is worthy of our attention because everything leads to liberation. Absolutely everything." That's totally encouraging. In this light, she was saying: truly trust. You can do anything you want to do. It's out of that sense of great

courage that one can practice.

You'll all agree that energy comes and goes. We don't have a constant state of low energy or high energy, and there's not much we can do about the level of energy itself. Yet we can stay steady in the effort to practice, whatever level of energy is present. And that means: keep going. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, whether we feel like it or don't feel like it, we just keep going. And it's not about getting anything—it's about truly revealing the momentary truth.

It's so easy to practice when it's pleasant. And what a good yogi I am when everything goes right! I'm the best here, and I'll do maybe two or three hours of sitting without moving, don't even think about the next walking, and I'm in here. And yet how easy it is that in a single moment there's a shift of energy and everything suddenly changes and we want out. It's so rapid, that change. Have you noticed in your own practice how quickly it can shift? And yet there can be that possibility of continuity.

I've seen for myself in my own practice how much I was placing worth on how things were going—how I was good when everything was fine, and how I felt worthless when everything was not fine—until I realized: this is totally ridiculous. It has nothing to do with me. It's causes and conditions that make it this way.

And yet we can support the mental factor of effort or energy. Now there's a key understanding here, really a secret: energy comes from energy. It comes from doing, meaning staying on the path. The very doing, the keeping on going, creates that energy that we're so desperately looking for. So many times that surrender of giving up is not helpful, because less energy gives less and less. Motivation really reduces the amount of energy, and that is mental.

I've seen for myself that in late night sits—or not even late night, just after the Dharma talk—so often I don't have so much energy in the evening when I practice long. And how easy it was for me to say, "Dharma talk, and then I'll practice in my room. Or I'll make up for that hour tomorrow morning—I'll get up earlier." And of course, the next morning I wouldn't get up earlier because there was less energy, which means that there were maybe two hours of practice that I would be losing.

After a few days of this, I could notice that there was less and less interest during those evening hours. And yet, thank goodness, suddenly something rose up saying, "Okay, tonight I'm just going to be determined. I vow to stay in the hall until the end of the schedule." And I did that for the same number of days that I had given in. It was amazing, because after a few nights the energy level was raised, and I could stay awake after the last bell rang in the hall. I couldn't believe it.

There was, of course, a moment of not really wanting. But then in that sitting, the energy level started raising—which I didn't even think of giving a chance at first.

So giving ourselves a chance to do that bit of extra. And it might be that this is your thing, or it may not be. Maybe it's getting up earlier. Sometimes we're too lax. Sometimes it's not enough effort, and sometimes we

strive too much.

So this is an important point in this time of the retreat—to explore our limits and to notice how we can help ourselves in the best way possible while we're here. Like Pascal said last night, he was talking about working at the edge. And what are edges? It's a moment in this time of the retreat where we can refine our practice. And if needed, speak to a teacher about this—the quality of effort or energy that is available, or where it is that you might help yourself towards finding a balance.

It's not about pushing or forcing. We've emphasized a lot of relaxation, but we do need to nourish that continuity of mindfulness every moment.

In the context of effort, Ajahn Amaro says that it's always different. We always need to ask ourselves the question: What is the quality of energy? What is the effort needed here? One moment it will be that we need to relax because we're tense. And often physically you can feel the tension. Therefore you need to relax and settle back. Enjoy the ride because the momentum is strong. Another moment it is that we apply mindfulness and it gives just a little sense of raised energy. And then we don't need to put extra effort because it would push us into the next moment. And so then we need to rest.

See how subtle this is. Awareness does that job. Mindfulness does the job. Yet we need to connect rather than space out. It's truly giving the necessary ingredients to the flower for it to blossom. And it's blossoming in its own time. We don't need to rush. We can't force the flower to open. We would never think of forcing a flower to open.

Allowing that blossoming, that blooming of the flower in its own time, watching its nature—this is so valuable. And that is the quality of patience. So we just keep at it. Every little moment of water, of sun, of good soil just allows for that plant to flourish. And it's the same with us. We just show up and show up and show up. And meditation, the art of revealing the truth, will reveal sensitivity, receptivity, openness, acceptance, and seeing what is.

There's a poem from Kabir that I'd like to share. He says:

Don't go outside your house to see flowers, my friend.
Don't bother with that excursion.
Inside your body, there are flowers.
One flower has a thousand petals.
That will do for a place to sit.
Sitting there, you will have a glimpse of beauty
inside the body and out of it,
before gardens and after gardens.

So that quality of caring, of mettā, is definitely one that flavors life. And it gives the possibility of staying with the determination, the intention, the motivation of continuity. It's all about balance.

The last of the energizing factors is rapture. Energy brings rapture. It is that quality of joyful interest. And it quite spontaneously comes forth. It's that quality that brings tremendous freedom of understanding when there is joy, gladness in the mind—a happiness which comes spontaneously from connecting and being energized, interested, and mindful. That's, you can say, the fruit of all those qualities that have emerged. It's a meditative state. It's not a joy that is created from getting sense pleasures. It's truly dependent upon the quality of the mind.

And it has nothing to do with the content of the experience. I was astonished the first time that there was a very strong pain in the knee and rapture was living in the body. It happens.

The simile of that joyful interest is that of a person who has been walking in the desert for days. Imagine yourself walking in the desert for days, and in the distance you see a lake of cool, clear water. You can just imagine how you'd feel after walking for days in the desert—most probably it would bring up an intense joy. And that is that quality of intense joy in the mind. It comes out of a mind that has been nourished with interest and all the qualities that have been mentioned.

So that joyful interest gives the possibility of keeping interested. It's extraordinary. In those moments, not much effort is needed. We're truly quite happy and glad about our practice. These are the moments when we can relax back, and it's often easy to get seduced by the rapture, to feel attached to the gladness, attached to the joy. We may have the tendency to take that personally again, rather than seeing it as just a passing state. And if we do so, we'll see that this very beautiful quality of joyful interest can turn into an agitated state, a more tense state of overexcitement or exhilaration. It can feel like that in the body.

If there's an excess of rapture or joyful interest, it easily turns into agitation, restlessness. Therefore, we need to really see for ourselves how we can balance that type of quality in the mind with the factors that are calming. If it's totally in balance and there's just that joyful interest, it brings forth the next quality, which is tranquility. So you can notice how these mental factors, these states of mind, work with one another. I'll be talking about the calming factors next week.

So you might want to see for yourself in your own practice when it is that mindfulness is present. Just see and relate in a way of staying curious. Notice when there's the presence or absence of interest, energy, gladness, happiness. The beauty and love of the truth of the Dhamma is revealed in each moment that we are present. It's that simple. So it's an encouragement to stay connected and intimate. And that will allow the arising of understanding about the nature of what is happening in the mind, what is happening in the body. It liberates the mind and heart here and now.

I'd like to close with a quote from T.S. Eliot, who says, "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

May we in each moment have the interest to know the place, whatever is happening, for the first time.

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