The Seven Factors of Awakening - Part 2

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 59:51

You know the topic of the dharma talk—the second part of the Factors of Awakening.

This teaching on the seven factors of awakening helps us move towards understanding. And what is it that we understand? Well, basically, we're seeing the four noble truths. Again and again, we're seeing suffering, the cause of suffering, and sometimes we see the end of suffering. And what we're practicing is the path.

The Buddha said over and over again that his only interest in teaching the Dhamma was exactly for that reason—that we see suffering, that we understand its cause, and that we can end it. And it's really possible to end suffering. That's why we're here. Otherwise there wouldn't be any meaning for us to be sitting here hours after hours and doing our walking.

Now, whatever we think, and you might wonder about techniques or ways of practice, the essence of the teaching is the same, whether we're practicing Tibetan Buddhism or even Vedanta. I'd like to offer two different quotes from two different sources. One is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher. The other one is from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who wrote *I Am That*—he's an Advaita Indian non-duality teacher. You'll see how close these two quotes are, and it's just fascinating to see how, in the essence of the path, we are meant to learn in a way that will end by seeing exactly what it is that we can transform.

The first quote is this: "The capability of human life is beyond our imagination. This capability is unique. What counts is the human capacity to investigate and transform our own mind and the world around us in a powerful and positive direction."

I think that we can say that we're doing this, that it's our aspiration to transform our mind, and then through understanding our mind, we transform the world around us in a powerful and positive direction in the way that we can.

The second quote says: "By being with yourself, by watching yourself in your practice with alert interest, with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge because it is there, you encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and consciousness with its captive energies. This is the great work of mindfulness, of awareness. It removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Wisdom is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of wisdom."

Isn't that beautiful? Wisdom is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of wisdom.

We probably understand a little bit more by now, with the dharma talks and our inner process, about what this transformation is about and how it happens. It manifests with the activation of positive qualities that are lying deep within us. It's not that we don't have them. We call forth this incredible, powerful force of alert attention, mindfulness, that enables the understanding moment by moment. It's this direct seeing that has the capacity to transform the mind. And it's not due to our beliefs, our ideas, our concepts that we will do so. It really is not about representing ourselves a better path.

So it's not about bending the mind to change it through ideas, or changing other people because we don't like the way they're behaving. It's really allowing this process of understanding, which requires a greater and greater acceptance of what is. And that is mindfulness, which will lead to greater mindfulness that will enable that transformation.

With the power of mindfulness, there are six other qualities that we have at our disposal that will help us see through the ideas, the thoughts, the concepts, and touch into our inherent nature.

Just as a reminder, in case you've forgotten what they are: there are three arousing qualities, which are investigation, energy, and joy or rapture. Once mindfulness connects, investigates, penetrates, and explores, we really see through the nature and understand phenomena as it is. It raises the level of interest, and it has the power to lighten up that which has been in the dark, that which we haven't seen.

This exploration leads one to have more and more energy. That interest brings energy or courage—strength of heart. And that natural interest just develops over and over again. That desire to keep going really becomes quite natural.

The joy or the rapture is not that we see only something pleasant. It's the joy or the rapture of seeing the truth, of connecting with the reality and enabling that to be okay. Seeing the truth and not moving away from what is presented to us, even if there are afflictive emotions, difficult mind states.

It's important here to realize that these factors of awakening manifest all along, even if there is the presence of a very deeply rooted difficult emotion. Rebecca talked about difficult mind states on Friday night and how we can bring balance as we're practicing. It's exactly those qualities of the seven factors which are clearly manifesting, even though we don't notice it at times.

We're so entangled in trying to meet fear or sadness or anger that we're not noticing that in reality there is a nourishment of those factors of awakening.

And I'd like to read a story which really illustrates this very well. It's an incredible illustration of how one can be on the path, stay on the path, and release one of the deepest difficult emotions.

This is a story from Ajahn Chah's book, and he's telling it himself. In Thailand, there's a very strong ghost culture. When children hear scary stories, there are always ghosts in them. And they're really nasty and gory, filled with all sorts of blood and guts and evil and malevolence. Even here, perhaps we don't hear so

much about ghosts, but in a child, that's where fear can really manifest quite strongly, quite powerfully.

This fear was one of the greatest fears that the great Thai forest master Ajahn Chah had in himself. It was something that really bothered him. He had been a monk for quite some time and was well aware that he had been avoiding this fear. It was something he had never really wanted to meet, really resolve. He was known to be a self-reliant and strong monk, yet also known to have extreme fear of these ghosts. When going alone to practice in the forest, he would continually recite protective verses to keep the ghosts away—which was probably one good means.

Once in his practice, he decided to go straight at this fear, to have the strength of heart. He had run away from it long enough; he was going to face it.

So Ajahn Chah decided to set up his mosquito net and camp in the burning ground outside the village where he had been staying. You should imagine the burning ground to be a place where there would be full exposure of ghosts—what in his mind was ghost, but what we might see as spirits or corpses.

He said it took every ounce of his effort to put one foot in front of the other to enter the burning ground. As dusk was falling, his mind was screaming: "Don't be ridiculous. Don't do this. It's not good for your practice. Be reasonable. Maybe you can do this later, another time, next year, when you'll have your practice more together."

Don't we do this?

But he willed himself to stay and set up his camping place. Once he put up the mosquito net, he went in and just sat there. There had been a funeral of a child that day, and Ajahn Chah had been fine since everyone was around.

Then during that first night, he became so afraid he just locked himself in one spot. When dawn came, he said to himself, "Oh, great, I've done it. I've done my cremation ground thing. I'm off." But then he realized and said to himself, "No, no, no. That's not transcending fear. That's just enduring. I haven't gotten through this at all. I'm still absolutely terrified. I can give myself the excuse that I don't have to do it, but the terror is still here in me. I need to stay tonight."

He hoped there wouldn't be another burning that evening. But sure enough, an adult had died and was cremated that day. During the day, everyone was around, and again he was fine. As soon as night came, he was left alone. All that was left was his mosquito net for protection and himself.

You might think that a mosquito net is not a great protection, but to Ajahn Chah it felt like a fortress circled with seven concentric walls. He says in his autobiography, "Even the presence of my alms bowl was reassuring."

He made the resolution to sit there and to be with his emotions, with the fear. The night before, there had been familiar noises, nothing special. On the second night, things changed. He was sitting there around

midnight when he thought he heard footsteps. Ajahn Chah was sitting there thinking, "I hear footsteps. It's not an animal. It's a two-footed creature. And the person is coming from the fire."

So he said to himself, "Don't be ridiculous. Maybe it's one of the villagers coming to see if I'm all right. Maybe they've come to offer me something, and if they do, they will come up and say hello." Nevertheless, he had taken the resolve to stay seated with his eyes closed.

Then he heard these footsteps—thump, thump, thump—getting closer and closer. He started to tighten up. The sweat poured out of him, and he told himself, "Oh, don't panic. It's just one of the villagers with heavy steps." But in his mind, he could see the skeleton with guts hanging out, eyes dropping down the cheek, and a half-burnt mouth. It really happens to all of us, doesn't it?

As he felt this mess of flesh walking towards him, he told himself, "Don't believe this. This is just your imagination. Stop. Be still. Concentrate and let go of the fear." Meanwhile, the footsteps were getting closer and closer. Then he heard the steps going around and around him—thump, thump, thump—circling around him.

By this time, he was in a state of white-hot fear. He had gone beyond anxiety. His body was locked solid and sweating bullets; he was absolutely rigid. Then this presence came and stood right in front of him. Achan Cha was still determined not to open his eyes, and at this point he was so completely fear-stricken that it burst. The fear system was going at absolutely full force when suddenly he had the thought: all these years I've been reciting, "The body is impermanent, feeling is impermanent. The body is not self, feelings are not self."

So he was afraid, but he was also very concentrated and alert. The insight flashed into his mind: even if this is some terrible ghost or monster that is going to attack me, all that it can attack is that which is not me. And instantly the feelings of terror evaporated. It was like switching on a light. The fear disappeared completely, and he went into an incredibly joyful state. He went straight from total dukkha, total pain, to an extraordinary bliss.

His mind was very alert, and as that happened, he heard the footsteps getting fainter. Eventually, the footsteps disappeared. He never found out their source. Achan Cha sat there without moving until dawn. During the night, it poured. Tears of rapture ran down his face and mixed with the rain. Nothing in the world could have moved him. He was now in a pure state of calm, of rest, in a place of true refuge, in a safe place. And he remembered the Buddha saying that the place of complete refuge is within.

That is it. Regardless of the situation, no matter what I meet, he told himself, it is just a matter of doing the practice.

It's amazing. It's just exactly what we're doing here. And there are so many ways that this process is emerging for us. Even if we have many contours and we take a lot of different pathways, this is our practice. And very clearly, the factors of awakening were there, adjacent to the fear. This is exactly what is

happening for us all, because otherwise we wouldn't be able to do the path. It would be really too difficult.

So that gladness is where we stay. That rapture is essential. When we meet times when there is that quality of energy which brings up that rapture, it uplifts the heart and mind and gives us strength of courage.

Now, like I said the other night, rapture can easily move into extremes. We can have some lightness, but we get very excited about the rapture or the joy that is present, and it gets out of hand. There's over-excitement, over-exuberance, which raises the level of energy too much, and that's when we feel restlessness. We then need to relax.

In my own practice, I've had a lot of this at the beginning. Seeing Sayadaw U Pandita quite frequently in my interviews, I think for at least three weeks the advice was one phrase. He was just saying, "You are too excited."

Cultivate peace. And my response was, how do I do that? He says, mindfulness will take care of it. Mindfulness balances. Just stay present. Don't get excited about what is happening. And it wasn't seeing fantastic things, I can say. It was just the revelation of this physical energy that was manifesting, which is a kind of rapture, and that I was getting caught in for some of the times.

So the three energizing factors need to be balanced with the three tranquilizing factors. Tranquility often comes after we've experienced some ease in the body and the mind. It's said that tranquility is nourished by ease of well-being in the body and in the mind, just like in Ajahn Chah's story or the Buddha's enlightenment story, where it's said that he stayed completely still for a number of days, just couldn't move from the state of peace. Well, that was ultimate peace, wasn't it?

It's said that tranquility is like the cool shade of a tree to a person that has been in the hot sun. It's a state of mind that we can relax into for a moment. And often we miss that moment because we're already heading to meet the next experience. That's why when we say if it's kind of neutral, if there's not much happening, just allow yourself to meet that experience. Let go of the tension and there's no need to search for another experience. This is when we allow ourselves to be receptive and can let go of the tendency to control, to want another experience. And we just miss the quality of calm, of tranquility.

It's extremely helpful if we've had a cycle of turmoil, whether with a physical sensation or with a mind state, something which has been really difficult. It's helpful to notice when that is changing, when there is a release in the mind, in the body, and to just allow that calm, that state of no intensity, to be there. And to not confuse that for boredom. Calm and boredom can be confused, because suddenly the shift of the present experience can be so different that we might say, okay, now what? And miss the possibility of calm.

This is a quote from Ajahn Chah. He says, "Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course." And that's what calm does. "Then your mind will become still in any surroundings like a clear forest pool. All

kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still." This is a form of happiness.

We're so not used to it because in our lives, the intensity is just so heightened that that state of calm is often not valued. In our practice, it's a factor of awakening. So do remember that. Step into the coolness of the shade whenever it is possible for you. Don't miss the opportunities.

Now, that tranquility happens with the changing flow of experiences. There was a point in my practice when I thought that I would experience stillness only when everything would stop—like not feeling the breath anymore, for example. Really kind of thinking that there was a possibility of stopping the breath. And it's not that at all that we're talking about. It's the mindfulness that is steady enough and that allows us to be just present with what is.

So again, it's a factor of awakening which is not belonging to anyone. It's not personal. We can't control it. You can't say, okay, now I'm going to be calm. You might welcome that factor of enlightenment or quality in a way that it's true—if we incline the mind towards those factors rather than towards stress or restlessness, they do come forth more easily. And so it's quite helpful to show up and to say, hey, what is happening right here? Is there calm? And to notice what's happening. What is the experience being received, and then letting go?

Now, the habit of doing in our practice is something that needs to be seen. Whatever form you have of doing something is just preventing one from enabling the deepening process in our practice.

Doing in the way that we might want to change things, the course of events. It may be a doing where we're constantly seeking new experiences. "Oh, I've seen that already." And what can we see that's a new experience after three and a half weeks of practice here? So it's that constant seeking for something we haven't seen before.

It may be that we're ignoring something that wants to be showing itself. Just like Ajahn Chah, who went through a whole process, years of ignoring his fear, and then suddenly one day opening to, "Oh, I don't think I can really further my practice or develop my practice if I don't give some time to this particular experience." So it's possible that there's a sense of ignoring or avoiding.

As we notice doing, we might just be aware of that attitude in the mind, and it already gives a relief. There's an energetic release when we notice that that's what's happening—that there's constantly a manipulation being held there in the background. And to appreciate the fact of allowing ourselves to see that and pull back.

One of my teachers says the only real thing that you need to do is to show up. And then the rest is up to the flow of changing experiences, the natural law of Dhamma. He says often people show up and then what happens is they want a specific experience, which is then an interference.

So the second stabilizing factor is that steadiness or concentration which comes from that attitude of calm, of receptivity, of allowing, of stillness. With all the factors we've mentioned before, very spontaneously in a way, the mind comes back to a collectedness. There's a gathering of that energy that allows one to stay present. It's that ability to stay with experience.

Now it's important to realize that we are not here emphasizing one particular experience, and you've probably understood that by now—that it's not about focusing only on one object. Because we're doing vipassana practice, and the purpose of our practice here is to see things as they are. So what is it that is steady? What is it that is stabilized, collected? It's the power of mindfulness itself. That one-pointedness is the steadiness of mindfulness. Mindfulness does not only land on experience, on whatever is present, but it can rest and allow us to see all the different appearances that land in the mind, moment by moment.

With time, when there is steadiness and concentration, there is simply a relaxing into the present moment. It may be that at times we even notice that the mind finds it's pretty nice to just stay in the present moment. It doesn't want to go somewhere else, whether into the past, into the story we've seen ten thousand times, or even into imagining. And there are moments—maybe they're brief—but there are moments when there's a taste of the preciousness of just that concentration, that steadiness of mind with what is. The mind simply doesn't need anything else than what it's offered.

So here we can say that concentration is just the opposite state of scatteredness or distractedness. There's no dispersion. And we can't make ourselves stay. You'll be surprised to hear that the proximate cause of concentration or steadiness of mind is happiness in the mind. It's gladness. When the mind is relaxed, then it's possible for it to stay, to be present.

So we don't force the focus away. What we do attend to—and you've probably got the secret by now—is we emphasize continuity of mindfulness, specifically here in this kind of practice. We can't strive for concentration because then we'd be really ambitious, but we do try to attend to the present moment with whatever it offers.

At times, as we've said, it's helpful to narrow the focus and bring the mind towards one type of experience—it could be the breath, or the body, the entire body, or just hearing. Both are valuable, and it's for us to know. There's no right or wrong here.

Ajahn Amaro explains this very well. He says people always ask, "Should I adopt this practice and be very strict, staying on one focus, or should I be more easygoing and go with the flow?" And he says, "If you set yourself a task to do, should you stick to it or should you just be ready to adapt to the condition?" That's a really valuable question.

The answer, he says, is that we love to have a formula to follow, a simple pattern that we can always obey that tells us we should be like this or do that. But in many ways, we need to be like a tree. A tree has both hardness, firmness, and it also has flexibility. If a tree had just firmness, then when the fierce wind blows,

the tree would break. The branch would snap. If the tree has just flexibility and no rigidity at all, then it can't stand up. It has no resilience. It will bend too easily.

In the same way, our practice uses both these qualities—being firm and independent within ourselves, staying with that which we have committed ourselves to, and at the same time being ready to bend, to move and shift according to the time, place, and situation.

One can think that these qualities are conflicting, but they're not. Like in a tree, we don't think of the soft curves of a tall tree and the way it moves in the wind as being something disharmonious or ugly, do we? We don't see its hardness and softness fighting against each other. In the same way, that quality of stillness, of firmness, of steadiness of mind is also aligned with the flexibility of mind, of movement, of being able to take in experiences as they arise and pass away.

One truly needs to know is that worry or anxiety brings us out of the moment. And often we do worry about how much concentration we have and if we have enough. We always want more concentration. I've had this pattern for myself, thinking that concentration is really important because we want to be present. And worrying about it really didn't help my practice. I can tell you, if it is of any help for you, it will only do one thing—bring more tension, more tension to get it.

So it's quite the opposite. That ease and that spiral towards relaxation and allowing is what will be helpful in regard to that quality of mind. Continuity of mindfulness is what brings steadiness in the mind. Sometimes it's very helpful to narrow the focus and just attend for some time to one type of object, but to not stay there.

I've also seen in my practice how easily one can become attached to concentration because it's safe. Because, of course, the hindrances are at bay, at least some of them. And here in our vipassana practice we are working in the direction of uprooting the hindrances, not just enabling them to not be in the scenery, here in the landscape. And then we go out in the world and, oh, they're all back. That's not very good news.

So it's to understand that we're training the mind to head towards wisdom. That wisdom and freedom is the goal.

This is Ajahn Chah. He says, "Normally the untrained mind is full of worries and anxieties. So when a bit of concentration arises in practice, you easily become attached to it, mistaking states of tranquility for the end of meditation. Sometimes you may even think you have put an end to lust, greed, or hatred, only to be overwhelmed by them later on. Actually, it is worse to be caught in calmness than to be stuck in agitation, because at least you will want to escape from agitation, whereas you are content to remain in calmness and not go any further."

That's so true.

"When extraordinary, clear, blissful states arise from insight practice, do not cling to them. Although this tranquility has a sweet taste, it too must be seen as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty. Absorption is not what the Buddha found essential in his meditation. Practice without thought of attaining absorption or any special state. Just know whether the mind is calm, concentrated or not. And if so, whether a little or a lot. In this way it will develop on its own. To concentrate is like turning on the switch, and wisdom is the resulting light. Without the switch, there is no light, but we should not waste our time playing with the switch. Likewise, concentration is the empty bowl, and wisdom is the food that fills it and makes the meal."

So you see how concentration and wisdom work hand in hand. Definitely an important factor of awakening—yet not the goal. Taking it for what it is. Practicing non-attachment, non-clinging in each moment.

And so here it's valuable to notice if there are preferences that we have in our practice. Notice now—you might have seen for all the hours that you're practicing—if you have attachments to certain mind states. We talked a lot about craving for sense pleasure, and that's one of the attachments. But we can also notice that attachment to meditative states or spiritual experiences is just another kind of attachment that we need to be aware of in our practice. Just be aware. That's all. Seeing them for what they are.

I have a little story. When I did my first long intensive retreat it was very hard. I think I said this. I was in Nepal for a month and the conditions were very difficult. And there was one day that I had some peace during a walking meditation. I was a sitter, and I did not like the walking as much as the sitting. And I was practicing in that one spot for the whole day. And I thought, okay, now I think I have a quality of practice in walking that is similar to sitting. And so I began really getting attached to my state.

But the next day, I went back to the walking practice and it was just awful. All this resistance arose—the mind was all over the place, didn't want to do it. And it was really difficult. I thought, where was that practice I had yesterday? And the thought arose: I better go back to that spot where I was practicing. Thinking that it was about the spot. It's just so fascinating how the mind can trick us in a way of sweet ignorance. Ignorance is bliss, as we say.

Sometimes humor helps in practice. I had a great insight in that moment—realizing that it wasn't about any condition, outer or inner. It was just really allowing the unpleasantness to be felt. It's so easy to get caught.

The third and last stabilizing factor is equanimity. So we have calm or tranquility, concentration or steadiness of mind, and equanimity.

There is a poem from one of the earliest Buddhist nuns. She says: "If your mind becomes firm like a rock and no longer shakes in a world where everything is shaking, your mind will be your greatest friend and suffering will not come your way."

Equanimity comes about as the result of all the previous qualities we've been discussing—one nourishing the other. It is this ability to be with whatever is presenting itself, whatever is emerging. A deep, deep quality of allowing. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant is not relevant here.

And it's not that we don't feel anything. We feel. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, there's no doubt that sensations are still there. It's not that we've been knocked out. Simply, there is no reactivity in the mind. It's just: oh, unpleasant feels like this. And the mind is pliable, flexible, steady, calm, and can just meet that experience as it shows itself. Unpleasant feels like this. So we don't grasp and don't push away, allowing the change and flow of experience to come and go. It's the result of a balanced mind—quite an extraordinary quality.

We've all had moments of this quality. You may think, oh, I don't know that quality of mind. And yes, there are moments when we're just with what is and we're allowing things to be just the way they are. There's the cessation of reactivity. The conditions are just right.

An image used to illustrate the quality of equanimity is that of a mountain. You know how the mountain sits and receives the sunshine. The rain falls on the mountain, it may get covered with snow, or it may be struck by lightning—all these different qualities that manifest. Whatever happens to that mountain, it just remains unwavering. There's that quality of unwavering. It doesn't waver.

Equanimity is the ground for freedom through wisdom. As a factor of awakening, it has a function. That function is to fill up where there is a lack and to reduce where there is excess, so we don't fall into the extremes of reactivity, whether it's for or against. Equanimity holds the hand of mindfulness, you can say. It rests the mind before it falls into liking and disliking. That's the quality.

What great power of mind—to experience that through all experiences, whatever we're mindful of, whether it's a painful sensation or a felt sense experience, tasting, touching, or a thought, there's that clear possibility of not getting caught. It's this quality that gives us greater strength of heart to stay in the process. Just stay present.

And it's also that quality that enables us to notice: oh, there's greater ease here. We understand more and more how the workings of the mind unfold, how grasping causes suffering, how opening to grasping when it is there just releases the suffering, how we can let go of our attachments to the various aspects of ourselves.

And we remember: when that quality is present, it's truly possible then that we notice—this is not ours. Whatever it is, it's not my pain.

It's not my thought. It's just a thought. It's just natural phenomena emerging. So there isn't a grasping to I, me, or mine there.

The Buddha was once asked, what is the distance between suffering and the end of suffering? Is there, are

they far away from one another, suffering and non-suffering? And he says the distance can be traversed in the blink of an eye. That's quite an image, isn't it? Just the blink of an eye and—end of suffering. Back into suffering. And we go through these movements.

So notice in your practice how you can help yourself with these factors of awakening, simply by beginning to see at times, noticing if they are present in your practice. Being mindful of mindfulness—is mindfulness present? Is investigation present? Energy? Joy? Tranquility? Calm? Steadiness of mind or concentration? Equanimity? It will help support the practice. And here again, it's not to make them happen. They naturally will arise with the continuity of mindfulness. If we dedicate ourselves to the practice, very naturally there's a deepening and a strengthening of these qualities. As these qualities are strengthening, there is a reduction of the hindrances. So to notice in our heart and mind if there's a possibility of seeing these emerge.

I know that for myself, it has been truly helpful to review at times which of these seven factors is weak. We each have one, two, three maybe, that are weaker than others because we have different tendencies. If we're someone with a lot of energy, then energy will be present and maybe not calm or stillness. If we're a quiet person and very calm, maybe there needs to be a little more energy offered to our practice. And to do this without judgment, but really with the force of interest.

Now these factors of awakening are also maturing in our daily life. It's impressive to see that—you may think, oh, I have to be on a three-month course or six-week course to have the factors of awakening emerge. And it's not so. They are qualities that can be totally integrated in our daily life. And that's quite extraordinary.

To end, I'll read a teaching that was offered from the great Thai master Ajahn Buddhadasa, who taught the factors of awakening to farmers in his village. It's called "Plowing Your Fields with the Factors of Awakening."

Much of Ajahn Buddhadasa's teaching involved applying the teachings to ordinary life. His thesis was that the point of being a Buddhist is to live without suffering—and not just out in some cave or on a meditation retreat or in the monastery, but in the midst of whatever we're doing. The way to live without suffering is to transform whatever we're doing, whether plowing the rice fields, brushing your teeth, or doing the dishes, into a practice of the path.

He was grounded in his environment, so he would often talk about the seven factors of awakening in very colloquial terms. During his lifetime, the Thai farmers in the neighborhood of Suan Mok Monastery were still using water buffaloes for plowing their fields. They hardly do that anymore due to economic changes, and there's not much rice farming there anymore. But it was different in the old days.

He would say to the villagers, for a farmer to plow his fields, he needs to use the seven factors of awakening. First of all, you have to be very aware of what you're doing. You have to be mindful of your

buffalo, and you have to be mindful of the plow. If the plow goes too deep, it gets stuck. If it's too shallow, it doesn't do any good. You have to be mindful of where you turn, of what signals you are giving the buffalo, and a host of other factors. And not only mindful, but you need to be constantly investigating while you are plowing the field with the water buffalo. The mind has to be alert in checking things out as you go, examining the quality of the soil, the level of moisture, the state of the buffalo, the location of obstacles.

You have to be learning in the process. You have to put energy into it, both physical and mental energy. Without energy, you may space out and get lax. If your buffalo is a good one, he may just keep going for a while. But some buffaloes are naughty—as are horses and mules—and if they discern any slackness in your hold, they'll take advantage of it.

You also need a certain amount of satisfaction in what you're doing. Whether we're plowing a field or practicing meditation, anything can become boring or burdensome if we don't find satisfaction in it. Or it can be fun, in a dharmic sense—interesting, rewarding. We're better able to pursue what we find satisfying in a wholesome way.

And this satisfaction will bring with it a state of calm. If we're plowing our field but we're agitated physically, we'll annoy or startle the buffalo. If our mind is agitated, it will interfere with some of the other factors. It's easier to be present, whether plowing the field or doing meditation practice, when we are calm.

When the mind settles down, it naturally becomes more focused. The forces that agitate and distract the mind become eliminated, and it is easier for the mind to remain settled upon a single task. Both the farmer and the buffalo need to be undistracted if the field is to get plowed before dark.

When all these factors are present and they mutually reinforce one another, the mind gains the ability to simply watch over and keep things on track. The effort becomes effortless, so to speak. Equanimity is like that. When you're completely in balance and yet you have some momentum, you don't make mistakes and the work just appears to move forward on its own.

This is how the seven factors of awakening can work together to turn any activity of daily life into a rewarding practice of progressing on the path of awakening.

May the seven factors of awakening emerge and support your practice. And may all the good energies and fruits of your practice be for the well-being and happiness of all beings everywhere.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.