The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 57:33

Let's begin this evening by retaking the refuges and precepts, so it's a chance for all of us to recommit to that practice of sīla.

I'm very aware that we spend a lot of time talking about what's difficult in our practice—difficult states of mind and heart, difficult experiences of the body, the hindrances, forms of pain or suffering. But I always feel when I give a talk like that, at least I know everyone can relate. There's something about sharing those experiences that we kind of bond on that level.

But it can feel sometimes like that's the lens through which we look at our experience, that we're on pain patrol, as one person called it, or even hindrance patrol, and the antenna, the radar are out just for whatever's difficult. How many times have you noted "unpleasant" so far on this retreat?

Someone on another retreat came in and spoke about this, and I could relate because I'm also a Monty Python fan. If you know the spam skit, she said it's like, you know, this dish is dukkha, dukkha, and more dukkha. And you say, well, isn't there a dish without any dukkha? Oh, there's this experience—it only has a little bit of dukkha in it. Or it's dukkha, dukkha, dukkha, lunch, nap, more dukkha. That can seem like what a day is like sometimes.

But it's really important to both recognize suffering and be able to bring it into our practice and accept it. This is a rich and deep part of our practice here. But just as important is to notice the wholesome states of mind, the beautiful qualities of heart that we are also developing here. Even though the Buddha often talked about freedom, he always talked about it in relationship to the cultivation of these beautiful qualities of heart.

As Ajahn Sumedho would say, you have to know the difficult to know what's opposite. You have to know anger to know non-anger. You have to know agitation to know what non-agitation is like. And it's really like you have to know dukkha to know sukha. Sukha is the Pali word for happiness. So that's a lot of what our practice is about. As we open to what's difficult, it actually can reveal to us the possibility of great happiness and great freedom.

What I want to talk to you about tonight is this beautiful list that the Buddha considered essential in our practice of wholesome factors called the seven factors of enlightenment—these seven qualities of mind or heart that actually are necessary to develop as we journey on this path towards greater and greater freedom.

I can always remember when I would hear this talk given, it seemed like some pie-in-the-sky kind of

fantasy about what practice could be like, because I was on the dukkha side of things. It was dukkha or boredom, kind of moving between those two. When people would talk about these beautiful and sublime states, I just put it on hold and thought, well, maybe sometime in the future, not now.

But as I've practiced more and also explored this list more, I've really seen the possibility—and perhaps what I was missing when I was having that relationship to it—of noticing what's actually here and the beauty in that. So often because we're focused on what's difficult, we skim over what's beautiful or what's working in our practice and don't give it full value. We don't actually acknowledge that it's there.

These experiences may be subtle in the beginning, but that's why we need to bring our mindfulness to them and train ourselves to notice them, because they are there in our practice. It's just a question of really being willing to acknowledge them. And in that acknowledgment, we see that it's not so distant a set of experiences. Any time we actually work with our experience directly, work with a difficulty or a hindrance, any time we open to something, we are cultivating these beautiful factors of mind known as the seven factors of enlightenment. Just by being mindful, the purification of that, the quality of attention that we bring to our experience when we're mindful of it is actually cultivating these factors. So hopefully you'll see that they're not so separate from your current experience.

As you know, the Buddha loved to make lists. It seemed to be his penchant. Everything is listed and ordered and numbered. There can be a sense of constriction in that. But actually, what I find is that knowing these lists and opening to them brings a sense of possibility. Maps are really helpful. If we don't know what the terrain is, if we haven't traveled in a certain direction ourselves, to have someone lay out a map for us really provides a sense of guidance and possibility.

Big pieces of paper, usually, that you'd unfold, and many hundreds of miles might be depicted on these maps.

But the new way of getting maps or directions is over the internet or GPS. And it's a very different way of looking at a map, especially the internet kind of way. How do I get from here to there? You get on Yahoo Maps and you get this printed-out list of directions. And it sounds so authoritative. You think you can put your trust in it: go 0.8 miles, turn left at so-and-so, go one and three-quarter miles, turn right at this place. It seems really trustworthy. It's printed, and you got it from the internet.

But how many of us have done that and been tripped up? We put our faith in these maps, and the trouble with those linear kind of maps is that if one piece of information is wrong, or if you miss a turn, then you're completely lost because you have no context for where you are.

I had this experience myself not so long ago. I had to lead a daylong in Sacramento, which is about a two-hour drive from where we live. It started at nine, so I had to leave home at six-thirty to get there in time. The organizer said, "I'll send you directions, get you right to the door." So I followed them, and all was very well and good until it said, "Take the exit for 116 and then head east." Driving along, driving

along, none of the exits mentioned 116. It wasn't in any of the references that I saw. After a while, you keep going and you start getting into countryside again. This isn't working. I had to pull off. Luckily, I had a real map and could find myself on it and realize that there was 116 there—but it's also West Street, and it's also the road that leads to such-and-such a town. With those extra pieces of information, I could find it. But just with that linear guidance, it's not possible.

It's even the same with GPS. We're getting so used to that kind of map-making, but it's this little square of information. You can move it around, but it's still just a little square. What they say about maps is that they provide us what they call a God's-eye view, where you can really see the whole terrain, locate yourself in it, and see possibilities, see alternatives, see things that you might want to try out—instead of being limited to a certain route that someone else has determined for you.

This is why maps that are very spacious, very broad in their application, are helpful for us in our practice. And of course, knowing a map just intellectually is theoretical. It's only when we actually tread the path ourselves and have those direct experiences that it becomes alive for us, that we can really say we know the map. It's like when you're driving: you can go a route many times as a passenger and not know it at all. It's when you're driving, when you are the person having the experience, that the knowledge actually deepens.

I know we're always looking for the right way in our practice. So many of the questions are: Is this the right way to do it? What should I do in this situation? Or we're looking for the quickest way. We don't say that, but that's really what's underneath those questions. I know there's a better way—you just haven't told us yet what that is. You're letting us fumble around in the dark.

Well, it's because it only works if you discover it for yourself. We give you the map. We say, look, there are these kinds of experiences, these ways of relating, these different tools that we can offer to you. But each one of us has to find our own way on this map.

Maps are really helpful when they're used skillfully and when we actually put them into practice, when we follow them and work with them. With this teaching on the seven factors, it's very much that way—for you to be able to say, when you have an experience, "Oh, that's what that is. That's calm. That's interest." Or to know for yourself, "Perhaps this is a little lacking in my practice. I need to go a little more in this direction." Out of skillfulness, out of wisdom—this is what these kind of maps can do. They can invite us to incline the mind in certain directions.

And when it's done skillfully, this gentle accepting intention of inclining the mind towards something can be really helpful, really wholesome.

A few years ago, I did a retreat here at IMS, about this time of year, where my intention was to do a period of concentration practice—just very simple ānāpāna breath meditation for concentration—and then to open up to vipassanā practice, to mindfulness practice. I did my two weeks, and it was very sweet; the

concentration developed quite well. It got very calm and focused and steady, absorbed in the practice.

And then came the time that I'd committed to when I would change to vipassanā. I noticed as that time got closer a great deal of reluctance to do that, because if you've done any concentration practice, there's a feeling of cocooning that can come. As you get absorbed into the object, there's a simplicity to it and a sweetness to it that's quite beguiling. It's very comforting and very reassuring. The thought of opening up and including something else—it was like, oh, do I want to even do that?

As I sat down for that sitting, because you have to just shift, you have to move from that sense of focus into openness, I could feel the reluctance and a kind of wondering: what's out there? I've been so secluded with the breath. There was a little bit of apprehension. But as I opened up, I can still so distinctly remember the room I was sitting in and the experiences that happened. The mind, in letting go of its fairly one-pointed focus and including all of the objects of my experience, felt very light. One of the things that concentration does is develop a light and malleable mind, and I could really feel that because I was very present and awake and alert.

As I looked at my experience and was almost delighting in it because of the contrast to what I was expecting, the thought that came to mind was: oh, some of the seven factors are here. It wasn't a thought that I had had much before in my practice. Usually it was "here's suffering" and "well, here's some acceptance." But to actually say, look, what's happening? I could go through the list and just notice the impact of each of the factors and feel that they were somewhat in balance. I'm not claiming anything about that—it was a very simple, direct experience—but it was a pointer to me of what was possible as these factors might deepen and be brought more into balance. On that retreat, one of the things I did was really explore for myself the seven factors and how I noticed their impact in my practice. This talk came very much out of that retreat.

So there are seven factors, and in the wise way of the Buddha, there are three arousing factors and three calming factors. Mindfulness is the balancing factor that actually begins the list and suffuses the whole of all the other factors. It's so necessary. The arousing factors are investigation, energy, and rapture. I'll go into all of them in more detail. The calming factors are tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

There's a way in which the list is somewhat linear. It's never that clearly so, but you can see a kind of developmental nature to the list. But it's not so helpful to think, well, today I'll work on this and tomorrow I'll work on that. They're much more mysterious than that. And of course, it's even more holographic, where each one supports and is supported by the other factors. Picture a circle, holographic, with lines going in and out between all of them. There are many feedback loops. I think it's more helpful to see it that way than as a direct one-way street, because then we can get confused or lost. To really see them as a whole is what matters.

It begins with mindfulness—sati is the Pāli word. Of course, we've spoken a lot about that. That's all we ever really speak about: mindfulness and all the different things that we can be mindful of. Mindfulness is

just this simple act of noticing what's happening, but knowing that we're noticing what's happening. It's that knowing that is what makes it mindfulness.

Christina Feldman, in her book on simplicity, has this really nice, very complete description of mindfulness. She says: "Mindfulness is not only a technique or a practice, but is concerned with the quality of wakeful presence and the willingness to learn that we bring to each moment in our lives. It is saturated with sensitivity and curiosity, with the willingness to make peace with all moments and all things, and the deep wish to be free wherever we are. Mindfulness illuminates all things and all activities."

You can see from that all of the different qualities that mindfulness cultivates, and it really becomes like our currency. We're not so concerned with the NASDAQ or the Dow, but with the MQ—the mindfulness quotient. You might have noticed, if you go into your interviews and describe some experience, the meditation teacher's stock answer is, well, did you notice that? Were you mindful of it? This is what the invitation always is: can we actually come into direct contact with our experience and know it for what it is?

As we explore this quality of mindfulness for ourselves, as we begin to experience it more continuously, we can see all the layers that are present in it. Acceptance, interest, equanimity, calm—all of these things can be present in mindfulness.

It can include and accept anything. The Buddha said that there is no other factor as powerful for the cultivation of wholesome states of mind and the diminishing of unwholesome ones as mindfulness. Just mindfulness is so powerful in that way.

But of course, we often have a sense that it's only good mindfulness, or our practice is only going well, when it's pleasant—when we're experiencing things that feel right to us in some way or another. And when we're struggling with something, this is bad practice. This is not where happiness or mindfulness lies.

Again, to turn to that great teacher and philosopher, Calvin and Hobbes. There's a cartoon where they're climbing a tree together, and Calvin is saying, "I suppose the secret to happiness is learning to appreciate the moment. I, for example, take great pleasure in being right here, right now, doing what we're doing." And Hobbes says, "Of course, you're supposed to be at school." But Calvin says, "I couldn't appreciate those moments."

So when it's difficult, we don't remember to bring our mindfulness in. We just struggle and get caught. Mindfulness really needs to be brought into every aspect of our experience. As U Tejaniya says, if you're aware, just be glad that you're aware. That is the right attitude. So when you are confronted by a defilement and are aware of it, be glad that you are aware of the defilement, even if it does not seem to dissolve. As long as you are aware of the defilement, you are doing well. Basically, you're cultivating your mindfulness.

But it's important not to elevate mindfulness to this rarefied experience of clarity and purity that we only touch every now and then, or to make it so burdensome—"I've got to be mindful, I should be more mindful." I think it's really more helpful to reframe it: "Oh, now I get to be mindful. Now there's this possibility, this invitation to know my experience more deeply, more truly."

It's really helpful to find a way to practice your mindfulness that's very easeful, that's very simple, that's grounded in the body, grounded in your awareness, and just knows enough. The refrain in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta on the foundations of mindfulness that we've referred to a number of times says again and again, "mindful to the extent necessary." And I love that. It's not any great depth. It's just to the extent necessary to know what we need to know.

Mindfulness as a factor, as we get more and more connected with our experience, leads naturally to the next factor, which is investigation or interest. Dhamma vicaya is the Pāli, and that's the I in that acronym RAIN that I talked about a while ago. A few of you have said that was helpful: Recognition, Acceptance, Interest or Investigation, and Non-identification.

Joseph, the other night, spoke about the difference between relaxed and casual practice, or relaxed and casual mindfulness. And I really think that the difference between those two is the cultivation of these next two factors of interest and energy. This is what makes the difference between practice and really being there, being present.

This factor of interest was actually the one that I always felt I was weakest in. I could get relatively concentrated, fairly calm, could have some energy arise out of practice, but I never felt I was quite there. That question I've heard a few of you ask—"I'm not getting enough insights. Where are the insights coming?"—I would have that feeling too.

There can be a way in our practice, or a way we sometimes understand mindfulness, that cultivates passivity, a kind of sense that we just sit back and watch the show. And yes, that is a helpful way to view practice, but it's not the only way. We need to really find what the balance of engagement is in our practice.

But interest or investigation also doesn't mean that we carry the dissecting tools around in our pocketbook and every time get out the scalpel and start to cut away at experience, trying deliberately to go through layers and layers to find out what's there, to get to the bottom of this, to keep discovering and rooting out whatever's below.

So it's really finding this balance. For me, dhamma vicaya has a non-interfering quality. It doesn't change the experience. It just gets closer to it, to see it as it is. I've heard Joseph refer to it as interested attention, which I think is helpful.

On this retreat that I mentioned, as I reflected on this quality and what would work for me as an invitation to incline the mind in this direction, the word that actually came for me—I hadn't heard people

use it, and it's only helpful for me, it may not work for you—was listening. But it wasn't listening with the ears. It was kind of like this full-body listening.

And what I related it to was what you might do if you're out in nature. I love to be in nature—I'm a bird watcher and an animal lover, often out there looking for things or interested in what's there. If someone says "listen," yes, you listen with the ears, but there's also a way your whole body kind of attunes. All the senses are awake in that moment, and there's just an openness to experience.

So that's what I would feel like when this quality was alive. It's just sort of like the body listening to the body, the mind listening to the mind. There was that sense of connecting or presence.

I can remember on that retreat doing walking meditation in the fall—going out there with the leaves crunching underfoot, that aliveness that can come from this kind of temperature when it's a little brisk, the wind blowing, smells in the air. That level of interest, that aliveness in experience—for me, that is dhammavicaya. But it's not an investigation that requires thought or thinking about. As I said, it's just this getting closer to experience, getting more directly in contact with what is, being willing to stay with our experience so we can see what happens—perhaps see its changing nature, see its qualities more closely.

This willingness to be there on an ongoing basis is what cultivates the wisdom of clear seeing, because we're there, we're interested, we're connected. We're seeing without a lot of projections.

Ajahn Chah, the Thai forest meditation master, said this about the seven factors and particularly about investigation:

"If we have studied about the seven factors of enlightenment, then we'll know what the books say, but we won't have seen the real factors of enlightenment. The real factors of enlightenment arise in the mind. Thus the Buddha came to give us all the various teachings. All the enlightened ones have taught the way out of suffering, and their recorded teachings we call the theoretical teachings. This theory originally comes from practice, but it has become merely book learning or words.

"The real factors of enlightenment have disappeared because we don't know them within ourselves. We don't see them within our own minds. If they arise, they arise out of practice. If they arise out of practice, they are factors leading to enlightenment of the Dhamma, and we can use their arising as an indication that our practice is correct. If we are not practicing rightly, such things will not appear.

"If we practice in the right way, then we can see the Dhamma. So we say to keep on practicing, feeling your way gradually and continually investigating. Don't think that what you are looking for can be found anywhere other than right here.

"This kind of understanding which comes from practice leads to surrender or giving up. Until there is complete surrender, we persevere, we persist in our contemplation. If desires or anger and dislike arise in our mind, we aren't indifferent to them. We don't just leave them, but rather take them and investigate to

see how and from where they arise. If such moods are already in our mind, then we contemplate and see how they work against us. We see them clearly and understand the difficulties which we cause ourselves by believing and following them. This kind of understanding is not found anywhere other than our own pure mind."

So it's just this willingness to contact our experience, whatever it might be, and be interested in it. And then all of that wisdom can arise out of that.

As we become interested in what's happening for us, the next factor is being cultivated, and that's the factor of energy, or viriya. Joseph spoke about this a lot the other night, so I won't go too much into it. But it is simply the effort to be aware. That's all it means—the effort we need to bring to our practice.

Of course, we need energy in practice: just the energy to get up in the morning, to stay present, to stay up at night, to sit, to walk. And you can probably remember what your energy was like at the beginning of the retreat, whenever that was for you—that feeling of sluggishness, of not connecting. Hopefully now, whether you've been here eight weeks or two weeks, you can feel how that energy has shifted. Perhaps you have more energy for practice, to get up a little early or stay up a little later. We really start to look at that quality of energy in its bigger picture—the energy of the day, of sitting and walking—but also moment to moment.

We tend to think of energy like a battery that's just going to run down. The more we use it, if we're not recharging it, it's running down. But it's actually the opposite in practice. We find that the more energy we put in, it actually recharges us, allowing us to get more interest, more connection.

For me, an analogy is always going swimming. I love to swim—in the ocean, in rivers, in lakes, wherever it is. But nearly always when you swim, the water is cold. There's that first moment where you put your foot in and you go, "Oh no, why would I want to do this?" The body just kind of recoils and contracts. But you keep going, a little bit deeper, and at the knees it's not so bad. Then it starts to get more sensitive as it goes up. And my mind is always going, "Don't do it. It's not worth it. Don't go in. It's too cold."

I just have to bring to mind all of the times—maybe even yesterday—that I swam, and when I did it, I really enjoyed it. But nearly every time, unless you just do that diving in, which is much better in the end, the mind just doesn't want to go there.

It doesn't want to engage in that activity. And you dive in, and you come up, and you think, what was I thinking? This is great. I love it! And you swim up and down and stay in. But every time there's that resistance, that conditioned habit saying it's not going to work this time—if I do it, I'm going to be cold or tired or whatever is going to happen.

So we really have to check in with this attitude of mind. On this retreat, when I felt into what energy or virya was for me, the word I came up with was "resolve." And I liked it because sometimes if we think of energy, there's a real doing quality to it—like I've got to do more, or I'm not doing enough, getting kind of

amped up about this. But resolve for me has that same quality I was speaking about before, of really being steady and willing to meet moment after moment what was happening for me. There was a sturdiness to it and a patience to it that seemed skillful.

So that's the word that has worked for me—to stay sitting through a difficult time or some upheaval in the practice, to keep coming back to the whole even when you feel challenged by what's going on. This requires resolve. It's really, again, a sense of commitment.

As we put in this extended effort over time, as we bring this sense of resolve to our practice, it does recharge the batteries. We're not losing energy. We're actually gaining energy, gaining momentum. And out of this momentum, often the next factor can be developed. That's the factor of rapture, or piti.

We often commonly translate it as rapture, though I think it's a little misleading—it sounds so delightful. I'll talk a little more about it, but there's a whole range of experiences that we can call piti. Other definitions are joyful interest or zestful interest, intense interest. It has a connotation of bliss or delight. It is a mental factor, but it often has strong resonance in the body. The body can resonate to this quality in the mind. But it always arises from this commitment to our practice, where we become so interested in the object of our attention—whether it's very one-pointed or it's more the openness of meditation—that out of the interest and the energy, we just delight in what we're paying attention to. There's really a sense that the attention, the mind, doesn't want to be anywhere else, is really happy to be paying attention to what we're paying attention to.

This is a traditional definition of piti from the Visuddhimagga, this very thick book of commentaries on practice called "The Path of Purification": Traditionally, rapture is graded into five categories—minor rapture, momentary rapture, showering rapture, uplifting rapture, and pervading rapture. Minor rapture is generally the first to appear in the progressive development of meditation; it is capable of causing the hairs of the body to rise. Momentary rapture, which is like lightning, comes next but cannot be sustained for very long. Showering rapture runs through the body in waves, producing a thrill but without leaving a lasting impact. Uplifting rapture, which can cause levitation, is more sustained but still tends to disturb concentration. All-pervading rapture is said to suffuse the whole body so that it becomes like a full bladder or like a mountain cavern inundated with a mighty flood of water.

Whenever we read this, everyone goes, "Oh, that's what I want—rapture! When is rapture? Where am I on this map? When is rapture going to happen?" Well, you never know, but it does arise out of that sense of being interested, being really connected to the meditation.

But it's not always pleasant. We translate it sometimes as bliss, but rapture can be very energetic. It can involve all sorts of distortions of experience—swellings and pushings and pullings. All of these kinds of things can be rapture, not always, but if it arises out of this concentrated, interested mind, it can be the experience of rapture. And often it can get so strong and actually disturbing to our practice, the energy moving through, that we just actually wish rapture to die down a little, to come into balance.

So there's often this arc in the practice of an opening to rapture, an interest, and at first it's exciting—something's going on—and after a while it's, "Okay, enough already with the rapture."

Where are we going from here? It can actually wear us down. There needs to be a balancing. And it's actually at this time that the shift can happen into the more calming factors.

It's interesting to me that such an energetic factor as rapture can actually lead to the next factor of tranquility. But what I think happens is that as the mind becomes absorbed into the object, thoughts naturally diminish and the hindrances recede a little. Once the energy calms down, once we become more acclimatized to that type of practice, peace arises. Calm or tranquility can come.

So it's an interesting shift. And it's not, as I say, that this is always linear—that rapture will happen and then calm. But I can really understand how there can be this progression. For all of us on this map, as I said, it's not a one-way street. We're moving around and in and out of these qualities all the time. But there can just be a tendency in this direction.

This state of calm or tranquility is one that many of us aren't used to. We're used to being busy, being engaged, being interested—or being nervous, or being worried. And then calm comes, and it's like, what is this? I remember sitting in this hall and hearing Michelle McDonald give this talk on the factors of enlightenment. She's someone that has a lot of interesting stuff in her practice—really, always things going on. And she said the first time she experienced calm, her note was, "Calm?" Kind of with a question mark on it. Like, what is this? I don't know this.

What can also happen is we confuse it with boredom or nothing happening. We go through all this agitation and a lot of aversion and desire and fantasies, and then it all can calm down a little bit, and we look around and think, hmm, nothing happening. This is boring. We might even wish back for our old disturbances rather than just sitting there in this neutrality.

It's really important at this point to notice the wholesome factor of calm if it's present and to appreciate it. Not to judge your practice—thinking there should be something else happening, that you need to get a little more engaged and dig something up. Please, appreciate calm. It can become such a refuge for us once we know it as a mind state, as an experience. We can start to see how with just a few breaths, with the way we're really connected, we can invite this steadiness of mind in, this peace of mind in. Really helpful for us to know and experience.

On another retreat I did here, we began just after September 11th, 2001. This retreat went on as it did every year, and I was booked to go on the first half. So it was quite an interesting time to come on retreat, with all of that emotion and fear and anxiety, anger and sorrow that that time brought up in all of us. And then to come to this refuge of IMS, where there was no news to turn off—going from twenty-four-seven news to no news. The only thing I remember thinking was, well, the planes are still flying, things must be going okay out in the world. But coming in here and just turning off from that barrage of news and

speculation and worry and fear—it was such a relief.

I remember going to my teachers and saying, "It's so great. My mind has just gotten so calm and quiet." It was like, phew. And I just saw this six weeks of calm and quiet just deepening and deepening, how wonderful that would be. Of course, it didn't happen. I think the mind was just so happy to have this refuge that it was easily able to go to that sense of calm. Of course, I then came up with all sorts of other things to think about and worry about. But still, I got to so appreciate calm and peace, having come out of such an agitated time.

Calm is the quality, the tranquility, that can lead to the next factor of concentration, or samādhi. And again, concentration is the word we usually use, but it's not a great translation. Better words might be unification of mind, or non-distractedness, or wholeness of mind—because concentration has a sense of fixedness or even rigidity, a narrowness of focus. A concentrated mind doesn't necessarily have those qualities. It can be very open, very light, very spacious, but undisturbed, undistracted, really fully in its experience.

We build this concentration not by trying hard, not by focusing in some intense way, but just by successive moments of mindfulness. Gradually this quality can accumulate in us.

And it's a powerful state of mind. The Buddha said never underestimate the power of a concentrated mind. A concentrated mind becomes, as they say, malleable, wieldy. It's able to turn with wisdom to cultivate these wholesome qualities, and it allows us to stay steady with our experience, to see things clearly as they are. And it invites the next factor, is supported by the next factor, and supports the next factor of equanimity, or *upekkhā*.

This is also one of the Brahma Viharas, so we'll be practicing it in the last weeks of the retreat. Now this factor of equanimity is one that's often misunderstood, confused with detachment—a distancing of ourselves from experience, disinterested in some negative kind of way. This is not the true experience of equanimity. Shaila spoke about it beautifully this morning, about this connected experience that is in balance, that is able to open to the whole range of our experience without being shaken by it, without being sent off balance. If equanimity is too disengaged, it's not true equanimity. We have to be in contact with our experience to really be equanimous, to really know what's happening and be involved.

I've done some periods of intensive equanimity practice, and it was really interesting to explore this quality—to feel when I would move forward into too much doing or too much wanting to fix or change things, and then move back into a kind of aloof distance. Finding that balance. There is a coolness to equanimity, but it's not apathetic or disengaged. It's connected to experience.

Again, on that retreat during September 11th, I was interviewing with Joseph, my teacher, and talking about how a lot of the time the mind was very balanced and calm, but I would feel, right out there very close by, all of the thoughts of 9/11 and the fear of not knowing what was going on. And he very wisely

said, "Nothing should be held outside of the practice. Everything needs to be included." He advised me to do a practice where, in a quiet sitting, I would actually deliberately bring to mind or open to those thoughts. It was such an interesting experience to bring those challenging, distressing thoughts into a mind that was in balance, and to see how I could hold them. I could still feel all of the feelings, but there was a sense of capacity, a sense of being able to meet them and not be thrown off balance—or to see that I would get a little off balance, but the inclination of the mind was to come back into balance through the equanimity.

So anytime we accept something just as it is, open to it fully, this is equanimity. Again, not to make it too elevated, as though equanimity means we're just floating above everything. As our teacher John says, just to be able to say "it's like this"—this experience is like this—that's equanimity enough for us to deepen in our practice. And so this quality of equanimity is often there. It's often there in just simple mindfulness, when we're knowing what's happening just as it is. Part of this practice is to tease out these threads and see when these factors are present.

So our whole development becomes feeding the factors of enlightenment and starving the hindrances. Because any time we recognize, accept, and work with a hindrance, we are automatically feeding the factors of enlightenment. And any time we support the factors, acknowledge the factors, we're weakening the tendencies of the hindrances. It really is this balancing.

Another thing that Joseph said to me that was helpful was finding the thread of wholesome in the unwholesome. Take the hindrances, for example. In sleepiness, the thread of the wholesome is calm. If we can find that thread and enliven it, we can go from sleepiness to calm—a very wholesome state, one of the factors. The same with anger: to find the wisdom or the energy of anger and let that diminish the hindrance while arousing the wisdom factor. With restlessness, again, energy—you can take out that thread of energy from the restlessness and invite interest into the practice. And in doubt, the hindrance of doubt, the thread of wholesomeness, of skillfulness, is inquiry or investigation—the willingness to look at what's actually happening.

So we discover these tools, we discover these maps, these paths and ways of practicing where we can see what feeds the factors and diminishes the hindrances. This is the map that we create for ourselves. We get the basic bare bones from our reading, from teachings, from knowing the Dhamma, but we create the map for ourselves that knows this path, this terrain, knows what works for us, knows and trusts that we have the skillful tools. We know that dwelling on irritation and ill will will just exacerbate that feeling. We know that letting go of views and opinions will bring about equanimity and calm. We see this directly for ourselves—what works and what gets in the way.

And so we learn to balance these factors. Of course, we can't will them. It's not a situation where we can say, "I want more of this and less of that." But noticing what's present, inclining the mind, being willing to find that thread of skillfulness or wholesomeness in our experience, and through that very attention

allowing those beautiful qualities to develop—this is the skillful way to practice.

So if we notice the hindrance of restlessness or whatever, to be willing to work with it, to engage with it, to use antidotes, to know for ourselves what calm is, to have a sense of the whole spectrum of these settled states of mind—calm, tranquility, peace, equanimity—we explore them and know them for ourselves. To be willing to bring in more energy into the practice when that's what's needed, to connect more directly to our experience. If we're feeling passive, kind of laid back in practice, to be willing to notice that and come forward just enough to meet experience. So practice becomes this flow of balancing.

We never get it completely right. It really is so much like the tightrope walker on the tightrope. We're always moving and balancing. There's no one right way. But this willingness to engage and explore is what brings the practice alive. And knowing these maps, being willing to set out and explore them for yourself, is what allows these factors to develop.

As I said, I'm a bird watcher, and I often read bird books. It's always interesting to me how I'll read the books and put them away, then be out somewhere and see a bird I've never seen before. Just the thought will come, "Oh, that's a yellow-bellied sapsucker." I'd never seen one—we don't have them back in California—but just the information is there, and so the recognition can come in that instant.

I was also living in India a while ago. Again, I'm from Australia, and we have very different birds there. I heard this sound one day, and I thought, "Well, if a woodpecker was going to make a sound, that's the kind of sound a woodpecker might make." So I started looking, and I saw my first woodpecker.

It's just that inclination of the mind. If we have the information and are willing to trust ourselves, to open to experience, to meet it fully—not push away the difficult or try to hold on to what's pleasant—all of these experiences can open up for us. They're not that distant from us.

So we begin with this simple act of mindfulness, of just knowing what's happening. From that, the whole path can unfold for us. The wisdom and the equanimity, the possibilities are right there as we simply continue with our practice. The simple acts of sitting and walking and knowing we're sitting and walking, of eating our food and taking care of the body—all of this leads, if it's done with mindfulness, with care, to the development of these factors and greater and greater degrees of freedom.

I want to close with the words of the Buddha from the Aṅguttara Nikāya:

"Imagine, Uttiya, a royal frontier fortress with strong foundations, strong walls and towers, and a single gate. There at the gate is a wise gatekeeper, experienced and intelligent, who keeps out strangers and lets in only those she knows. As she patrols along the road around the fortress, she would see not any joints or openings in the wall large enough for even a cat to slip through. And although she wouldn't know exactly how many living beings entered or left the fortress, she would know that whatever living beings of any size entered or left the fortress, they would all leave or enter through that one gate.

In the same way, the Tathāgata is not concerned that the whole world or half of it or one-third of it will find freedom by means of the Dhamma. What he does know is this: All of those who have found freedom, or are finding freedom, or will find freedom have done so by abandoning the five hindrances, their minds well established in the four foundations of mindfulness, developing as they actually are the seven factors of enlightenment. This is how they found freedom, or are finding freedom, or will find freedom."

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