The Factors of Awakening

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:03:27

At this point in the retreat, we've talked quite a bit about the difficult energies that come into the heart and mind—the hindrances, the roots of the unwholesome, working with difficult emotions. Now we're turning a corner in our discourse and are going to start talking more about the beautiful states of mind. Carol talked last night about the quality of loving kindness, which you've been practicing for a few weeks. Tonight I want to talk about another set of beautiful qualities called the seven factors of awakening.

The reason I want to talk about them now is that I'm hearing them a lot in the interviews and questions. These beautiful qualities, now that you're settled in for three weeks, are really starting to come alive and percolate in you—in everyone I've talked to—and I think they're there in everyone here. It's very helpful to start paying attention to them, recognize them, and know how to nurture them.

There's a story from the Native American tradition that was popular right after September 11th. Many of you may have heard it. A young boy goes to school and has a conflict with a classmate. He feels he's been treated unfairly and comes back in the evening to his home to talk to his grandfather about it. He describes how angry he feels and how he wants some kind of revenge for what happened at school that day.

The grandfather listens and says, "Yes, I know just what you mean. When I think about all the things that have been done—people taking what didn't belong to them and not caring for the people they injured—I can feel very angry and full of hatred and want to take vengeance on them." He said, "It's like there are two wolves inside of me. One wolf is angry and quarrelsome and hateful. But there's another wolf inside of me that is patient, that wants to be kind to everyone regardless of what they've done, and to live in harmony with others. These two wolves often battle inside me, and each one tries to dominate my spirit, each one tries to come out on top."

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

And the old man said, "The one that I feed."

What struck me about this story—and it's a very touching story about spiritual life in general—was the language the old man used, because it's very similar to the language the Buddha used. The Buddha talked many times about how the path is all about starving the hindrances and feeding these factors of awakening. So really the question is, in all of our practice, how do we starve or weaken the afflictive forces in the heart and mind, and how do we strengthen and grow and build up the beautiful qualities?

This work is the work of what's called bhavana, or mental development. I once quoted the French poet

Paul Valéry, who in one of his notebooks wrote, "Other people write books, but I am making my mind." In this work of meditation, we are making our minds also, and we can shape them in the direction of these beautiful qualities once we understand how they come about. There are no limits that I know of to the depth of development of these qualities.

A teacher who comes to Spirit Rock often is Ajahn Jumnian, a Thai monk who's now in his sixties and has been visiting for probably the past ten years. In one conversation, Ajahn Jumnian said that he has not had any anger in twenty-five years. That's a nice mind. That's a mind of some accomplishment. The Buddha talked about how through this development, the mind can really become tamed, brought under some kind of control so that the afflictive forces don't torment us any longer.

Another person who was very impressive in this regard, this degree of development, was an Indian teacher named Dipa Ma. Many of you have heard of her, and there's a wonderful book about her life simply called *Dipa Ma* that many women practitioners resonate strongly with because she was such a strong figure as a woman teacher in our tradition.

I had the chance to spend some time with Dipa Ma in the early 1980s and look after her for a month on her first visit to this country. She was accompanied by her grandson, who was about four years old at that time and was a little bit of a whirlwind. We would take them out shopping in the local mall near Amherst. I remember the young boy—his name was Rishi—running down the aisles of the department store, tugging at clothes, clothes falling off in the aisle, hangers falling down, chaos just following him. And then Dipa Ma running after him—she was probably in her sixties at that point—her white robes flapping behind her as she ran down the aisle, but there was always a little smile on her face. She had such great love and patience for her grandson. I thought, if you can be cool shopping in a mall in America, you're a pretty cooled-out yogi.

At one point, Dipa Ma helped teach a three-month course here. Some yogis were spending time with her. Everybody was struck by her presence, her quality of stillness and openness. They asked her, "What is in your mind? What's there? What do you feel?"

She replied, "I only have three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and metta." That was it. And she seemed to abide in that place most of the time. The kind of development that is possible is really unlimited, and people like Dipa Ma show us some of that potential.

The states I want to talk about tonight, the seven factors of awakening, are probably the group that the Buddha talked most about when describing the unfolding of meditation. As the hindrances are the list of difficulties that meditators frequently encounter, these are the list of wholesome qualities that are directly developed through meditation practice. They're ones it's very helpful for us as meditators to understand. Really, I would say these factors become the meditator's best friend. These are the qualities that accompany us on the journey and produce the beautiful outcomes as well as the insights that arise on the path.

So the seven states included in this group are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. These are the ones I want to talk about tonight. The Buddha said they lead to awakening—therefore they're called factors of awakening. Makes sense. He described them all as maturing in release. That is, when we develop them and bring them to strength, they lead to our release or liberation. That's their destination.

Another quote from the Buddha: "Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, he slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbāna"—to the unconditioned, to awakening. These are the factors that lead in that direction.

They can also be understood as the qualities of a mind that is approaching the moment of awakening or enlightenment. As the mind is filled with these factors, as they come into strength, maturity, fulfillment, the way that mind is formed is right next door to the unconditioned, right next door to nibbāna. You might say it's the closest approximation that can be made to that. It's as though we're tuning to or imitating this unconditioned nature. And as the mind gets closer and closer in approximation to it, it can then fall in. That moment of enlightenment or awakening happens because of that proximity.

The Buddha described these factors in a given order because he said one leads to the next leads to the next. So I'll explain them that way, and I think it's helpful to understand them in that developmental line. But they're also nonlinear in the sense that every one of them supports the others, can support the others. So it's not really that we have to strictly start at the first and only then go to the second and only then to the third. They grow all along the path.

In the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha describes this as one of the important areas of dhammas or principles that the meditator should understand. What he says is we should know these seven factors. We should also know what leads them to arise and how to bring them to fulfillment or real strength. So that's pointing to the basic terrain of knowing the factors, but also being open to their arising and being, let's say, weak in the beginning. Then as the meditation develops, as we learn how to strengthen them, we can grow them up into quite strong forces in the mind.

It's my impression that everyone here has tasted these factors by this point in the retreat to a greater or lesser degree. And in coming to recognize them, they don't have to be built to a very strong level. We can start to get familiar with them just in their first taste. I want to describe them tonight and encourage you to begin to tune into them in your practice. I think they're already there. It's just a matter of looking for them, getting to know them, and then understanding how to develop them further.

The first of the factors in the sequence the Buddha described was mindfulness. Because we've been developing this from the very beginning, it is really the practice of mindfulness that has set the chain going for these other factors. Whether you consciously knew the other factors were developing or not, mindfulness has been the engine that has made them grow already.

The next three factors are what are called arousing. They're qualities that tend to pick energy up. The final three are called calming. They're factors that tend to settle the energy that's been brought up by the first three. Mindfulness starts the chain going, and then mindfulness is also the factor that balances the energizing and the calming sets of the seven factors.

Overall, what this grouping describes is a balance between arousing energy and tranquilizing energy. When we gave simple instructions in the beginning, pointing to a way of being that was both tranquil and alert, that's an expression of this same balance. So you can see this is a really fundamental place we're aiming in our meditation practice—to find this balance where there's enough energy to be alert, awake, sensitive to each moment as it unfolds and changes, but also relaxed, steady, to some extent still, and able to observe clearly. It's the balance of these qualities that make the mind ripe for meditation, ripe for insight, ripe for awakening.

Let's talk about these one by one.

Mindfulness we've talked a lot about already. I don't need to say much about this factor tonight. You've been doing it hour by hour, day by day. It's grown quite strongly in everyone that I've seen, and I suspect in everyone who's here. Sometimes we don't notice it because the growth of mindfulness doesn't mean that the movement of mind stops, but it means that we're much more aware of it when it's happening.

One thing I'm noticing and hearing in the interviews is it's taking less effort to be present than it did at the beginning. This is something you may notice. It's easier, more effortless to be in contact with the present moment. Sometimes it can start to feel like you're not working hard enough. You may question, am I really doing it? Because in the beginning, it takes a lot of effort to connect with the present, not be swept away by thinking. As the mindfulness has gotten stronger, that becomes a little more natural, a little easier to do.

But you can trust that. When that more effortless quality appears, you can use it as an indicator to relax. Trust that awareness will reveal what you need to see.

When mindfulness is present and we start to look at our experience, we tend to get interested in it. We get curious. We notice a level of detail, a level of activity we haven't seen before, and that leads us to pay closer attention. That leads to the second factor, which is the factor of investigation.

Investigation sounds very conceptual, like we should be raising lots of questions, thinking about it, reflecting. But in meditation, that's not the meaning of investigation. Investigation really means: let me draw the attention closer to my experience. It's not that we have to ask a lot or think a lot or wonder a lot. We just have to look. We just have to connect more directly. You might say, feel things more intimately in our experience.

I'll give you a simple example. In experiencing the breath, many people report feeling bored after some time. "Oh, the breath seems so similar. I've been with a hundred breaths in the last hour. It seems like

nothing is changing. My attention's drifting off." What do we do? Boredom is often a factor of simply not looking for all the richness that is already there. By looking more closely, we can often refine that interest.

A few simple suggestions for investigation of the breath: Every breath has three parts—a beginning, middle, and end to the in-breath; a beginning, middle, and end to the out-breath. Can you notice those? Try it sometime and see. Can you feel the breath just as it's making itself known? Can you feel that long stretch of the in-breath coming in? Can you feel it fading away? Then how soon do you feel the first touch of an out-breath? Can you be with it through that whole middle portion of exhaling? And then can you feel it fading away to nothing again? If the mindfulness is close to the breath, you'll feel these three parts. And being interested in that will keep your attention there more easily.

Another good way to investigate the breath was an exercise that Sayadaw U Pandita used to assign meditators. His instructions were to follow the breath at the abdomen with the rising and falling—but if you're experiencing it at the nose or the chest, you could also ask the same question. He would mention this in an interview and then ask for a reply later: "Tell me three distinct sensations that you notice in an in-breath. Tell me three distinct sensations you notice in an out-breath."

Often we might think, "Oh, there's just the in-breath." But if we look more closely, we see that within the in-breath there are lots of little sensations coming and going, coming and going, coming and going over the course of that whole breathing in. Over the course of the out-breath, the same thing—lots of little sensations coming, going, coming, going. So he would say, "Tell me three sensations you notice for an in-breath and an out-breath."

When you have to find it and report to a teacher like Sayadaw U Pandita, it brings your interest into the moment. You don't want to walk into the room the next day and say, "I couldn't find anything." So you get very motivated. And then if you were successful, he'd say, "Well, next day tell me something new that you haven't told me before." So you'd get motivated all over again.

This kind of investigation really draws on a quality of what you might call careful attention. In Pali, there's a phrase that the Buddha used over and over again: *yoniso manasikāra*. *Manasikāra* means attention. *Yoni so* is often translated as "wise." The Buddha talked about how to apply attention in ways that got us in trouble, and how to apply attention in ways that led to growth in meditation.

This word *yoniso*, which is often translated as "wise," actually has a meaning of womb-like—like the womb from which babies come. It's beautiful to think about our mindfulness as embodying a womb-like attention, because that has this lovely image of whatever our object is—breath, sound, sensation, emotion—being embraced with mindfulness. It's being surrounded and held and nurtured.

the way that a womb holds and nurtures the baby that's growing in there.

So you get the sense that mindfulness is not this cold, clinical, detached quality of observation, but has a quality that Carol was talking about last night of non-hatred, a quality leaning toward metta. Adosa was

the Pali word that she used—non-hatred. And so it suggests a quality of attention that's warm and caring and embracing, a friendly quality.

You can feel this happening really naturally with certain experiences. When you smell a dessert coming out at lunch, the attention sort of goes to the back table in this really embracing way, holding and nourishing the cake or whatever is coming. I was taking a short walk after tea the other night and I heard one honk up in the sky. I looked up, and this flight of about twenty Canadian geese was going overhead in a really well-formed V. This was before the rain started. They were flying through the sky, fairly low, and I could see them all really clearly. When that happened, my attention was just there effortlessly. I wasn't distracted. I didn't want to be anywhere else. Because of that interest, the attention was just there by itself.

So when we can get interested in this experience of mind and body, mindfulness comes really easily. Investigation can really support this quality of interest. We could take another example—investigating an emotion. If we can find a quality of interest in it, the emotion itself may be difficult, but the quality of interest brings in a really positive element. We feel we can learn from this. There's something to be understood here. Wisdom can grow. Our ability to hold it can grow. And when we bring that positive element in, that positive feeling, there's actually a kind of joy even in being with a difficult emotion.

So take a look and notice if sometimes even being with some of the primary patterns that you find—anxiety or worry or fear or sadness—if being with them and being interested doesn't bring a kind of joy to the experience that helps really keep the attention with that emotion.

Then as we stay with the experience out of this interest, we not only feel the immediate characteristics—with a breath, we feel all the little sensations that are coming and going, the flutters, the pressure, the relaxation or expansion; with an emotion, we feel its quality of joy as different from a quality of contentment, different from a quality of anxiety—we feel those particulars. But also as we stay, we start to see some of the universals.

All the little sensations that are coming and going with the breath—we start to see there's nothing solid there. It's always changing. Breath really shows impermanence when we look closely. There's not just one sensation. All sensations come and go. We can see impermanence with emotion too. None of them last. And we can start to investigate how this quality that we call fear is probably in all of us. The quality we call happiness is there in all of us. It's not mine or yours. It's part of nature. It's part of human nature.

So we start to get under this idea of self. It's not about me. It's not about you. It's part of human nature. And we take a little bit of the ownership, a little bit of the I, me, mine away from that experience. This comes naturally out of the interest in investigating combined with mindfulness.

The other thing that's powerful about investigation is that it's a direct expression of the wisdom nature of our mind. The practice that we're doing, called Insight Meditation, really relies in the end on developing wisdom and understanding. But sometimes it's hard to know how we foster that. Of all the factors

available for us to directly strengthen, investigation is one that really draws out this wisdom element. Investigation expresses: I want to see, I want to understand, I want to know. So we're activating that wisdom quality really directly.

Now, as we become more interested, as we launch this investigation, we move into the third factor, which is the factor of energy. The Pali word here is viriya, sometimes translated as energy, sometimes as effort, sometimes as energetic effort—because translators couldn't decide, so they jammed them together.

And I'll just say a few more words that are sometimes associated with this term, to give you a sense of its meaning: strength, courage, ardor—or my current favorite, enthusiasm. For me, virya is about what quality of enthusiasm we bring to our practice. This enthusiasm relies on interest and investigation; it's triggered by those factors, conditioned by them.

Virya refers to energy in both body and mind, but it's a specific kind of energy—an enthusiasm that's directed toward the path, toward the work we're doing here. The Buddha's description captures this well: "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the responsibility of cultivating wholesome states." There you get a feeling for where the quality of courage comes in. The word "vira," the root of virya, means hero in Pali. So this quality has a heroic dimension about it.

And you all manifest this day by day. I'm touched by this every time in interviews. We know it's not easy doing the discipline you're doing—having left your homes, sitting, walking, being present, sitting still moment after moment after moment. It takes a lot of resolve to keep coming back and greeting the present moment. It's not always pleasant, not always easy. Each of you is carrying out a kind of heroic undertaking in your willingness to be here. That's the expression of the courageous quality inherent in virya.

Of course, it comes out of our motivation, our aspiration, and our understanding of what we need to do to carry out the practice. You can see this in any walk of life. People who want to reach a difficult goal carry out this quality of courageous effort again and again.

When I look for analogies, I often turn to professional athletes, where this quality is very clear. My particular sport addiction is tennis—I like to play, follow it, and watch. The level of physical conditioning in the world of tennis has gone way up in the last ten years. You have people like Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, these amazing athletes who can run around a court for five hours or longer and still look fresh. You hardly ever see Federer even sweat. Nadal is working hard, but he can do it all day long. They're really incredible, incredibly well conditioned.

I remember when I was following Andre Agassi, who retired a number of years ago, I read about his training regimen. He had a very tough workout coach who would lead him on runs in the hills around Las Vegas, where Agassi lives. It's a desert, as you probably know, and it gets really hot most of the year. He

would be pushed to sprint up these hills until he got so tired that he was throwing up. And when he reached that point, the trainer said, "Okay, that's enough for today. You can go back down." That's the extent to which he worked to achieve his goal of conditioning.

In another realm—the one I'm most in awe of—are professional bike riders. Every year I like to follow the Tour de France when it happens, in July and a little into August. I think those are the most amazing athletes on the face of the planet. They go for most of a month, going full out day after day after day. How they get the energy to climb back on the bike the next day and do it again, going up thousands of meters on really steep grades, racing other people who are in the best physical shape imaginable—it's just amazing.

I followed Lance Armstrong for a number of years when he won the Tour seven times. He made a comment: "Yeah, I do well in this sport because I have a high tolerance for pain. Basically, when I go out and race, I know that I'm just going to be setting myself up for eight hours of continuous physical pain. That's what happens when I get on a bike." That's a lot of determination. That's a lot of courage. And in the training for that, there's a lot of hours of pain too.

Now, these people are going for fame and fortune. We're going for the end of suffering. But actually, I think our effort is not inferior to theirs. The effort you all put in on a course like this is similar to that of world-class athletes.

And by the way, every day when I would come in for an interview with Joseph and Sharon, they would ask me how many hours I slept. So I couldn't get off the hook easily.

After a lot of sleepy sittings and sleepy walkings and sleepy standings, I managed to get my sleep down to four hours. And the rest of the day, I was awake and practicing that noting practice for the other twenty. It was probably as hard as I've ever worked in a meditation retreat, and I learned a tremendous amount from doing it. I look back on that period—fortunately it's looking back now; I was younger then—and I learned things there that I don't know if I could have learned any other way. So I'm really grateful that I had demanding teachers at that time and that I practiced in that style. There were a lot of great lessons.

And the continuity of that many hours of wakefulness and that steady noting was as fine as I've ever experienced in my life. That was really the fruit. The moment-to-moment continuity of mindfulness was just superb from that.

So that's kind of the courageous side, the extending side, the going-to-the-limit side of this kind of effort, of virya. But there's another way to understand virya that doesn't rely so much on that courage element, and that is the quality of just persisting.

Bhikkhu Bodhi said in one of his books on the Eightfold Path that there are only two things required for you to reach liberation. One is that you start, and the second is that you continue. He said if you do those two things, the outcome is guaranteed. That's the quality of persistence. Just keep going.

This quality was expressed in a story from the Tibetan tradition. There's a great yogi named Milarepa who was practicing, I think, in the eleventh century. He lived most of his practice career in a cave, lived very simply, always dressed in just a thin white cloth, and sustained himself through the winters by the practice of inner heat, the yoga of inner heat. He trained some great disciples, two in particular: Gampopa and Rechungpa.

The story goes that Milarepa was saying goodbye to Gampopa, who was a great disciple and later founded other schools in that lineage. Gampopa had been studying with Milarepa for quite some time, receiving lots of teachings and transmissions and secret instructions and pith instructions. He was about to go off on his own, find his own cave, and practice for quite an extended period.

The student, very sorry to leave the teacher but knowing it was time to carry on his own practice, came to see Milarepa to say goodbye. He bowed to him, said his farewell, and started off down the path. Then Milarepa called him back. He said, "There's one more teaching I have to give you. This is really the secret to everything I've achieved through meditation."

To give this teaching, Milarepa turned around so his back was toward Gampopa, then flipped up the hem of his white skirt, leaned over, and showed Gampopa his buttocks, which were calloused—it said—as hard as the hoof of a camel. Milarepa said, "This is really the key to my success. Sitting on my backside is what has made my meditation successful, and this is the kind of perseverance you need to do also, Gampopa."

It's said Gampopa took that advice, practiced very hard, and became himself a great teacher with many disciples and schools.

Another teacher, a modern teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya from Burma, also expresses this quality of perseverance in a very lovely way. He says, "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort which is simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this, you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

So again, just this steadiness of application—it's not hard to be aware. Can you feel your seat sitting on the chair right now? That's not hard. But it's hard to do it moment after moment after moment. And that's what Sayadaw U Tejaniya is pointing to: a relaxed effort, but very persistent.

When there's this kind of energy in practice, an interest in what we're doing, the mind becomes alert and bright and present. That then leads into the next quality of the seven, which is called rapture. Rapture is a bit of an exaggeration as a word. When I think of rapture, I think of somebody almost unconscious in a state of ecstasy. That's too much. A better translation, I think, is something like joyful interest or rapt attention.

The quality of rapture—the word in Pali is pīti—is really this quality of being bright, alert, energetic, and connected to the present moment. And you start to find within that connection, whatever the

focus—breath, body, sensation, sounds—you start to find a happiness in that. It's really a wonderful moment in meditation when you find you like your object.

It might be the breath, it might be sounds, but there's a sense in coming into contact with the object that it's pleasant to be there. There's a happiness in being with the object itself.

In the beginning, it just seems like work, and the object doesn't seem that exciting. It's certainly not delightful. But as this quality of present-moment interest and attention grows, it takes on a pleasant quality. Then it becomes easier to stay connected because of the enjoyment of it.

There's a teacher in Australia who lives in Sky's hometown of Perth—a Western monk named Ajahn Brahm who teaches a lot on the qualities of the breath for strong concentration. It's his central interest and his central teaching. The way he encourages people to make a really close connection with the breath is to see it as beautiful. Because if you can see the breath as beautiful, you'll naturally want to be there—just like seeing a flock of geese, just like watching a sunset, just like seeing the face of a child. So finding this quality of delight or joy in relation to the meditation object is the next factor of awakening. It's a mental factor because it comes out of the mind's relationship to the object, but it's said to express itself physically, in varying degrees.

Often when people reach this stage, there's a kind of release or opening to energy in the body. This energy can be experienced, classically, in five different ways. It can be minor—just a kind of trembling on the surface of the skin. It can be what's called momentary—a rush of energy like a bolt of lightning. There's a showering kind of energy where waves pass through the body, one wave arising and passing away, and later perhaps another wave. There's an uplifting kind of energy where the body starts to feel really light—you could sit for a long time on the cushion because of this lightness, and sometimes you feel you could almost float off the cushion. It's said that this uplifting quality of piti is what allows yogis to develop the ability to levitate. Remember those old stories about the Maharishi teaching levitation somewhere in Indiana? I recently met someone who had been on those retreats, and she said people actually were kind of bouncing across the room, based on the development of this factor of piti expressing itself through the body lifting. This is described in the Buddhist texts as well. And the fifth kind of rapture is said to be all-pervading, where it's felt throughout the body.

Mostly this energy is experienced as pleasant because it arises from a happy relationship with the meditation object. But as the factor develops more strongly, the bodily energy becomes more intense, and it can become unpleasant. The energy can grow strong enough that it's no longer felt as pleasant—it can feel a little too intense, or at times even overwhelming. This doesn't mean the meditation has gone wrong or that anything bad is happening. Generally, one just needs to open and accommodate this slightly too-strong energy. As the meditation deepens, it tends to smooth out, but sometimes it's a little unpleasant at this stage.

Piti is one of the factors connected with the strengthening of concentration. It has a quality of happiness

and is often paired with the word sukha, which also means happiness. Together, the enjoyment of the object and the growth of this quality of sukha—pleasure or contentment—begin to lead into the second half of the factors, which are the calming factors.

So the fifth factor that appears is calm, or tranquility. The way it comes about is this: as more happiness arises through this bright energy connecting with the object, finding that delight, a certain satisfaction emerges just based on the meditation—not based on having a particular experience or anything special, but simply in ordinary meditation. The mind starts to become contented. And because there's a quality of contentment, the mind is no longer tending to go out so much through desire, restlessness, aversion, and so on. This leads to a sense of the mind settling within itself, finding its contentment within its own operation. That settling is felt as a calming of mind and body. It's as though the mind starts to settle within the body itself.

This is often a new discovery in the meditation process. This unfolding of calm doesn't happen so often in daily life, and it's a new experience within meditation—after often a lot of active thoughts, restlessness, and other hindrances. As this calm develops, thoughts are no longer so frequently assaulting us, hindrances are no longer so generally plaguing us. And because there's a sense of calm and the body can relax, there's usually less pain in the body as well.

It's as though you come in on a stormy ocean—the waters of the hindrances and thoughts and bodily discomfort and restlessness, quite turbulent. And then, maybe just for short periods, maybe just for five or ten minutes, another space opens up. You feel like you've floated into a really calm harbor somewhere, out of the storms of the sea into this calm space. It may not last very long, but it's a really different kind of experience.

Emily Dickinson has a poem that expresses this movement, this discovery. It's a section from a poem called "Wild Nights":

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

Rowing in Eden. That's kind of what it feels like. It feels like you've come upon this blissful lake for a while. Maybe short, but you've touched it.

At this stage, one can start to open to a different approach to meditation, which is a sense of resting. One has opened to, discovered, unfolded a new quality that has a sense of stillness and rest in it.

Ajahn Amaro is a monk who used to live in Northern California and is now the abbot of Amaravati in England. He likes to give this as a meditation instruction, and it goes something like this: Rest in the natural peace and ease of mind and body that is present, and pay attention to that. But if something comes to disturb that peace, then pay attention to that.

That's a lovely thing to be able to do, and you can take it as an encouragement, as an instruction, anytime you'd like. Joseph gave that instruction early on in working with the breath: As I breathe in, I tranquilize the bodily formation. I tranquilize the mental formation. As I breathe out, I tranquilize the bodily and mental formations. So we can make this quality of calm more accessible by suggesting it to ourselves.

Sometimes when this quality of calm comes, it seems like it's kind of snuck up on us, and we may not recognize it. One meditator said that her first note was calm. Like, is this what they're talking about? She couldn't quite recognize it when it first came. Because it's a subtle state, it can slip under the radar, and often people will come into interviews and say, "You know, I had really interesting things going on a few days ago. I was working with this pain in my chest and it was really opening. And there were a lot of thoughts. I learned a lot about a relationship that I had in the past. But all that stuff—there's nothing happening now." And often we overlook the fact that what's happening now is this quality of calm.

The Buddha said the state of peace was really a pretty good state. But we often don't see it because it doesn't have the drama of the hindrances or a lot of thoughts. So it's important to notice it and appreciate it. It really opens the doors to a new movement in meditation. It's the foundation for a lot of inner contentment and inner peace.

It then sets the stage for the unfolding of the next factor, which is the quality of concentration. As the mind settles within itself and it's not sending itself out in desire for the future or regret about the past, its natural energy starts to collect. When the natural energy of the mind comes together and is unified, you discover that the mind is naturally strong. Its very nature is strength, and that strength is felt as stability—or you could say stillness.

So whereas calm might be kind of a momentary and easily disturbed state, as it grows further into concentration, there's a sense that concentration has a power. It has a power to be unmoved, unshaken by some of the normal comings and goings.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to come and teach at Spirit Rock before we built our retreat facility. We had a big open hillside that was kind of like an amphitheater, and we built a platform for him at the bottom of it. About a thousand people or more—maybe fifteen hundred people—could sit on the hillside and listen to his teachings. We would have him come for a daylong event.

It was amazing to be in his presence. His voice, of course, was amplified, but we could see him across the hill. He was so still in his body and in his speech that he just transmitted this quality of concentration all across the fifteen hundred people who were watching. It was like a samādhi engine that was generating and filling the whole space. And over the day that he taught, you could just feel everybody settle, settle, settle.

Concentration has this strong quality where you feel really grounded in the present moment. Even if thoughts come, they're seen in the present moment. It doesn't feel like they're going to knock you off your

mindfulness. This is a very satisfying feeling also. The mind being stable is a great relief—not being swayed so much by the hindrances, by past and future.

The Dalai Lama put it this way: Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility.

Concentration is a significant component of inner peace. This factor of mental stability also prepares the mind for insight. When things become still, we can see clearly what's happening. In this place of peace and stillness, when an insight comes, it goes deep. Concentration is a beautiful ground for understanding.

Someone might say something to us in daily life like, "Body sensations are always changing," and we think, "Oh yes, I've heard that before." But when you're in a concentrated place and you look everywhere in the body and see that every body sensation is changing, it affects your view of the body forever. It goes deep and transforms your relationship to life.

One of the things that happens in concentration is that pleasant and unpleasant experiences don't have as much impact on the mind. Someone mentioned this in an interview recently. They said they were sitting, concentrated, and felt a strong sensation in the leg that normally they would have identified as pain. From the stable attention of concentration, they looked at it more closely. In that closer look, they couldn't actually see pain there. All they saw was a strong sensation that really had the quality of neutrality—intense, but basically neutral.

This happens out of concentration. The pleasant and unpleasant things that come to us don't shake the mind so much, don't move us so much.

And this leads to the last of the factors of awakening, which is called equanimity. Equanimity is a state where we're not so thrown by the changing factors of pleasure and pain, and this gives the mind a lovely balance. You could call it balance, spaciousness, or an openness that can include many different things without being thrown off our centeredness.

In English, sometimes we hear this word equanimity and think it means unfeeling, but it's not like that. When the mind has this quality of balance and space and openness, the beautiful qualities of heart can actually be felt more directly and more strongly. The strength of equanimity makes us much more open to loving-kindness, to compassion, and to joy. It doesn't become a colder place as equanimity develops—it becomes a warmer place. We have the strength to open, to feel those qualities.

So mindfulness starts the unfolding. The first set of factors are energizing. Then as happiness develops out of the energy, the mind moves into a settled state within itself that leads to the calm, concentration, and strength that grows into equanimity.

As you meditate, start to notice when these different factors are arising. They may not last for a long time at first—they're all impermanent. When they come together well, that's a kind of peak experience. It's not

something that's going to happen every sitting. But start to look for the balance. Look for the quality of presence or mindfulness, the factor of energy that makes for alertness, brightness, and interest, and the factor of steadiness or calm.

Particularly keep an eye on the relationship between the energizing factors and the calming factors. It's this balance that is most important for keeping the mind in the sweet spot of meditation.

If the energizing factors are too high, you'll feel a lot of bodily energy and restlessness, and many thoughts may dart around taking you into past and future. The counterpoint then is to bring up the calming factors—perhaps return to a primary object like the breath, work with spacious awareness on sounds, consciously relax the body.

On the other hand, if the calming factors get too strong and the energizing factors are low, this leads to the state we call sinking mind. It can be very comfortable, very pleasant—you get a little bit drowsy, you could sit for hours—but the brightness of insight is not happening. This needs the arising of the energizing factors. You can accomplish that by bringing up energy directly, the antidote to sleepiness, or by doing steady noting on changing objects. This will wake up the alert, interested wisdom faculty of mind.

When these factors come together and into balance, we are in the place where we can open to insight, open eventually to awakening.

I'll close with these two quotes from the Buddha:

"Bhikkhus, these seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering."

And from the Anguttara Nikaya: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future—all will do so by overcoming the five hindrances that stain the mind, by firmly establishing the minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by cultivating the seven factors of awakening in their true nature."

Let's sit together for a moment.

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