The Factors of Enlightenment

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While the hindrances describe the difficulties we meet in meditation, the factors of enlightenment are the abilities we develop in meditation.

Bhante uses the image of wild geese in flight, and I found this very helpful. The leader is mindfulness. In support there are two flanks. If you watch wild geese, you will often find one flank flying more in the slipstream of the leader, taking it easy, while the other flank is spread out, almost as if they are vying to take over the lead. That's a very helpful image for these supporting factors.

Three of them are calming, helping us to take it easy. These three are concentration, equanimity, and tranquility. Then there is the wide flank, encouraging us to push ahead. These are energy, investigation of Dhamma, and joy.

So let's look in more detail at the seven factors which develop as we meditate.

Starting with mindfulness. It's ironic that this factor which is essentially so simple is also so hard to describe. It's a bit easier to describe what it's not. Mindfulness is not thinking or dreaming or planning or remembering or trying to work out what life is all about. It's the potential we have to know that we're thinking or dreaming or planning, as well as to feel the moods and emotions underlying all the mental activity and the physical sensations that accompany all this.

So much of our lives we are caught up in mental activity. This is the doing aspect of our minds. We're fascinated by our own thoughts and opinions, our stories about what happened in the past and what's going to happen in the future, our speculations on what life is all about. We lose touch with the potential for the human mind to simply know experience without trying to do anything at all.

To practice mindfulness, we tune into the raw data that is coming into our mind—sounds, physical sensations, and the feelings produced by moods and emotions, as well as the thoughts that emerge from the mind as it tries to process all this. We encourage ourselves to drop the fascination with the detail of our thoughts. It doesn't mean we have to stop thinking, but to know that a thought is happening whenever it is.

So this basic potential of our minds to know experience is the leading factor of enlightenment. It's hard for us to believe that just knowing is so powerful spiritually. We feel we have to do something about whatever we know in order to get anywhere. But gradually we come to accept that it is our misunderstandings that lead us into trouble. We are reacting too quickly without fully knowing what is going on. As we acknowledge this, we become more willing to spend time gathering the raw data, getting to know the

feelings and emotions that drive our thinking mind.

So mindfulness is our first tool in learning what life is all about. Simple data gathering, you could say. Getting the feel for the situation. Letting ourselves dwell in the here and now.

Let's look at the supporting factors now. First in the slipstream is concentration. But that word can crinkle our foreheads because we associate it with doing hard sums at school. The word focus is sometimes used. We direct our attention at something. Usually in meditation we start off by focusing on the sensations of breathing. The Pali word for this factor is samādhi, which gives the sense of the mind resting. So this factor rests the mind in the sensations of breathing or some other focus for attention.

Why does it help to focus attention? One reason is that it helps us stay present rather than get distracted into daydreams and fantasies. It also quiets the mind when its range of interest is limited, and when we have a narrow focus for attention we can go deeper into that phenomenon. Think of using a telescope. You have to look through a narrow tube so your range of vision is limited, but you can see far more clearly within this narrow range.

Happily, the Dhamma can be learned from anything, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. The four noble truths, the wheel of dependent origination—these are sewn into each sensation of the tummy rising and falling.

In essence then, any focus for attention will do. We normally start with the breath because this anchors our mind in physical reality, so our meditation is grounded, embodied. Also, those sensations are often felt as calming. If not, then try various touch points—the hands resting in the lap, the feet on the ground—whatever sensations provide the easiest resting place for the mind.

Once our usual fascination with stories and thoughts has shifted towards fascination for present experience, we can loosen this focus. Loosening the focus lets our minds be more natural, more ordinary. And that's what we want to get to know: our ordinary mind. So if a sound or an itchy feeling attracts attention, we can let the mind focus on these and learn the Dhamma there. We let the mind dwell wherever it is naturally drawn.

I don't know about you, but my mind is naturally drawn to detail.

When I rest attention in any feeling, a sort of fascination sets up, a longing to know it more deeply. So I like the narrow focus. But when that fascination leads to a sense of straining to see more deeply, then I need to widen my focus to see the broader picture and include that very sense of straining. Otherwise, I start getting uptight. When I feel the strain mindfully, I often find that I can relax again.

And whenever a strong emotion comes up, it's usually best to broaden the focus, to take in the full mind-body system and feel how this emotion is embodied. We feel the sensations, the threads of aversion and desire, the thought stream that might be erupting. When the emotion has burned away a bit, we

might again be drawn to some focus in the body, often the kernel of the emotion's energy. Attending to this, we might hear the thoughts and sense the feelings that bind us to the emotional state. This ability to focus and to broaden and narrow the focus as necessary is a great aid in deepening our self-knowledge.

Let's look at one of the factors in the wide flank now which pairs up with concentration so that the two balance one another out. This is the factor of energy. We need energy to accomplish anything. In meditation we need enough physical energy to sit upright or walk. Sounds easy, but remember those attacks of sleepiness, how desperately we long to lie down! We also need the mental energy of resolution. We resolve to be mindful. Every time we notice the mind has been wandering and come back to the breath, we are strengthening this factor of enlightenment.

When this factor is working well, we are alert and enthusiastic about the practice. We are fascinated by present experience and have a sense of zeal, a buzzing dedication to the here and now. At other times our energies go low and we can easily sink into the hindrances. Then again, we can get overly energised, striving impatiently for insight.

We strengthen the factor whenever we work skilfully with the hindrance of sleepiness. At these times we often need to find a more stimulating focus than the breath. That's the idea behind opening the eyes, standing up, and so forth that we discussed yesterday. Physical exercise is naturally energising, so going quite fast for the first few minutes of the walking meditation session helps. We can also stimulate ourselves mentally by reflecting on whatever inspired us to take up meditation practice and to come on retreat.

At times we can get over-energised, uptight and breathless with enthusiasm and zeal. Again, it can help to broaden the focus to give more room for the energy to burn off. Feeling the whole body can help, as can opening the eyes. Walking around the paddocks, rather than the short span used for walking meditation, can also burn off some pent-up craving for progress. We can also talk ourselves down, reminding ourselves to take it easy, that everything is fine, just as it is.

These two factors, concentration and energy, help each other out. When our energies are too high or too low, it usually helps to have a broad focus. When they are more balanced, the narrow focus channels all the energy into the Dhamma of each passing sensation and feeling.

Looking now at the next two supports: in the slipstream we have equanimity, and on the wide flank is investigation. Equanimity is that balance of mind that counters reactivity. It is the willingness not to seize every passing pleasure or oppose every passing irritant. It lets things be.

We strengthen equanimity every time we work skilfully with desire and aversion, gradually learning to let go of our addictions and surrender to what we dislike. This doesn't mean we become a marshmallow. We can still strive for what we feel is right and good. But the striving is not stressing us out or blinding us to others' needs. It's a balanced movement towards an attainable goal. Likewise, we can oppose wrongdoing

with equanimity. Great peacemakers like Nelson Mandela and Gandhi exemplify this, responding to injustice and oppression with wisdom rather than hatred.

Equanimity develops naturally as we see how phenomena arise and pass away. We can reflect on this on the broad scale, seeing how ephemeral are fashions and celebrities, for example. How people and institutions and political parties come to power and later fall from grace. How civilizations have died out. We can see it in our own lives. Many of the hopes and ambitions that fuelled us when we were young may be largely forgotten in middle and older age. Many cherished possessions and close relationships will have been lost.

Mindfulness helps us to see this in the minutiae of life—how each thought, emotion, sensation appears and disappears. We start asking ourselves what's the point in getting all hot and bothered about this; it will fade away in a few moments. Now that might sound as though we're distancing ourselves from life, but mindfulness doesn't work at a distance. It's a touchy-feely kind of learning, up close and personal. So the wisdom behind equanimity is very sensitive to our needs, our desires and aversions.

The willingness not to react comes from seeing again and again how futile it is to try to hold on to pleasure or avoid pain. As we experience the suffering caused by these reactions, we are persuaded to give up forcing things to be the way we want them to be.

Paradoxically, once we stop forcing, we find something else disappears as well. The problem we were trying to overcome vanishes without trace.

I couldn't see this clearly for many, many years. It even frightened me, the sudden loss of focus for my energies. While I struggled with moods and emotions, trying to get on top of things, there was at least a clear sense of what I was doing—struggling to solve a problem that, in my mind anyhow, desperately needed solving. Then there came the moment of surrender and the loss of any boundary against which I could push. It was so confusing I couldn't see the beauty in it.

Nowadays I'm much more used to the space that can open up when we stop reacting. It doesn't frighten me so much. I'm more willing to acknowledge the space and the fact that it has never actually hurt or threatened me in any way, despite all my mistrust and suspicions. As I grow easier with the space, my mind broadens. I find I can see things more easily from the other person's point of view. I'm more open to discussion, less frightened of failure.

So this is the factor of equanimity—a spaciousness that allows what we like and dislike to come and go without the need to clutch what we like and destroy what we dislike. It's a soothing quality which steadies mindfulness.

Equanimity is in the slipstream and is balanced on the wide flank by investigation. By this we mean investigation of Dhamma, discovering the teaching for ourselves. By comparison to equanimity, which has been very challenging for me, this factor of investigation comes more naturally. It may have helped that I

was always intrigued by the mystery of life. Where did I come from? Why am I here? What's life all about? I enjoy learning, and the notion that I can learn the Dhamma for myself from my own experience still thrills me.

One teaching we can investigate during meditation is the teaching around *anicca*. We can take an interest in the start and end of each breath, each footstep, each sensation. This draws us from our usual preoccupation with facts and concepts, which give the world a sense of solidity and predictability. The study of *anicca* engages us with the more fluid sense of reality as it appears at our sense doors.

We can also study the other characteristics of existence, *anattā* and *dukkha*. I'm especially drawn to the whole question of *dukkha*—to see can I pinpoint any source of stress, suffering, or dissatisfaction in my experience.

To take one example of working with aversion. At one level, I might know I'm fed up with all this meditation business, wishing it was over and I could do something active and worthwhile. There may also be a strong resistance to acknowledging this, never mind investigating it deeper. That first step is often the hardest—acknowledging.

If I can get over that and simply note, "OK, this is bad humour, disinterest, not wanting to meditate," then the factor of investigation starts to kick in. How is this bad humour felt in my body? Is it my jaw, my stomach? My attention would be drawn towards the unpleasant sensations and I begin to get warily curious about them. Are they stinging? Are they aching? Is it tightness I'm feeling?

I might also begin to catch fleeting glimpses of pleasant sensations and sense the tight grip with which I'm holding onto these. I might realise that the pleasantness gives a sense of self, insisting, "This is mine, I need this," or some variation on this theme. The unpleasant sensations and associated bad humour loosen a bit to show an underlying fear that my sense of self is being threatened.

By then I'm generally hooked on this present-moment detective story. And if I can maintain mindfulness with all its supporting factors, the crisis always resolves to give me a deeper understanding of how this being I call "me" is composed. With this understanding comes compassion for the stresses and strains around the kernel of goodness at the core of each human being.

This kind of investigation teaches me the truth of *anattā*, not-self. I feel how quickly and automatically I identify with pleasant mind states like clarity, *mettā*, happiness, and how hard it is to admit to unpleasant states like bad humour. Because of delusion, I believe I should be in control of my mind, always able to get myself into some shade of good humour. Again and again I learn that this mind-body complex has a life of its own and that my level of control is very limited.

This is a demonstration of *anattā*—that there's no one in charge of this entity I call "me." It's a very hard truth to digest, but the more often I feel my whole being relax as I let go of trying to control matters, the more persuaded I am that the sense of *anattā* is a very beautiful one.

The investigation also teaches us about *dukkha* and the cause of *dukkha*. Again and again we verify the second noble truth—that *dukkha* results from us wanting things to be different to how they are right now.

Equanimity and investigation make good partners, balancing one another out. When we are equanimous, the mind feels good, steady, balanced, peaceful. Without investigation, that could become a lovely resting place for the mind—a lovely experience but not leading anywhere. But if the factor of investigation is aroused, we get curious about that lovely, balanced steadiness, and often a subtle clinging will be revealed. Perhaps there is self-congratulating going on. "Amn't I wonderful to have such equanimity?"

At last I'm getting somewhere. As those little background whispers of thought are revealed, we may also feel a sense of holding, as if there is a hand in our mind clutching the steadiness and holding on to it. That sense of holding contains tinges of anxiety, fear, and loss. And so the mind may not feel so steady anymore as we feel ourselves grasping the state of equanimity. This turns into an encounter with the hindrance of desire—in this case, desire for an equanimous mind. Although our peaceful meditation is lost, we are on the path, learning how to enjoy equanimity without the pain of clinging to it.

On the other hand, when investigation is very strong, we can be buzzing with excitement, determined to get to the bottom of whatever is intriguing us. Perhaps it's a mind state like judgment, and we get really curious about how this is felt in the body and mind. If we're not careful, our curiosity can get the better of us, and we're unwittingly putting ourselves under pressure. We can get entangled with the judging mind and start judging ourselves because we can't see things clearly. Once we notice this, we need to try to get back to a more balanced state of mind. So equanimity is our strength here—the ability to persuade ourselves that the lack of clarity is not a big deal, nothing to get worked up about.

Let's look at the final pair now: tranquility and joy. Tranquility, as you can guess, is in the slipstream, calming us down. Joy on the wide flank, urging us on. Tranquility is very much bound up with equanimity. When the mind is balanced and equanimous, the heart feels tranquil, at ease. And tranquility is strengthened when we work skillfully with restlessness.

Tranquility was a late developer for me. As I look back on it, I can see that I was ignoring whatever little suggestions of calm were on offer. They didn't attract my attention, which was zooming in on stronger emotions. I was so intent on solving all my emotional problems that I skipped over those moments of ease. "I'm still plagued by fears and self-doubt. I'm nowhere near enlightenment. What does it matter that there's a moment's peace?" Those moments seemed irrelevant. It took a long time for me to be able to admit: just now, I'm not stressed out. Just now, things are okay. But once I got myself around to noticing what relaxation actually felt like, I started developing a taste for that experience. My determination to solve all my emotional problems dwindled slightly, and to my surprise, some of them solved themselves without me at the helm.

So I would advise you to get curious about ease, to take a real interest, even if it's only momentary, or just marginally easier than normal. The danger is that we judge, "This isn't worth anything, I'm still totally

uptight," and so the slightest relaxation is snuffed out immediately. This kind of thinking may be quite prevalent in the West because our culture puts so much emphasis on success. We want to be totally relaxed and floating in the clouds before we can judge ourselves to be any way tranquil. But we can only learn tranquility if we build on whatever small morsels we are offered.

The wonderful thing is that tranquility feels lovely, and so once we tune into it at all, we are naturally interested in developing it. Nowadays I find it can really help me through the storms of emotion to be able to discern any little chink in my armor of tension and to feel the gorgeous sensations that are released when we relax a tight muscle for a moment. This helps me persuade myself to give up on useless battles and make peace with whatever I am sensing as a problem.

Balancing tranquility on the wide flank, we have joy. At times it may be hard to believe, but we can actually get hooked on the present moment and really appreciate and enjoy meditation. This factor is very much linked with investigation. As we investigate, we get interested in our experience, and interest is in itself a form of joy. If you're interested in a book or a film, you are enjoying it. Think how much you enjoy any hobby, even if it's hard work at times.

We can fall into the same trap as with tranquility and expect to feel elated and rapturous whenever this factor is working. But if you ask yourself at times, "Am I interested in this?" I imagine the answer will often be yes. That might help you discern the quality of joy in your meditation.

To strengthen this quality, it also helps to take more interest in pleasant sensations and moods. Sometimes we are so intent on seeing dukkha and its cause that we ignore sources of pleasure, thinking them irrelevant. But the Buddha teaches us about suffering and the end of suffering. So we also need to get curious about pleasure. We need to sensitize ourselves to those fleeting moments when we're not caught up in stress and suffering. These moments are precious and need nurturing. It's so easy for them to be slapped down by the judgmental mind saying, "That's nothing. Think of all my real problems."

Another way we can hinder joy is by being overly fearful of indulging it.

We've heard the teaching around indulging pleasure and want to avoid that mistake, so we shy away from pleasant feelings. But if we're in the present moment rather than lost in thought, there's no danger of indulging. We'll feel the sense of clinging whenever it happens, and that will do its own teaching. It's a mistake to be afraid of indulging joy. What we're actually doing is indulging fear.

So when any suggestion of joy comes along, go for it. We need to let our minds get familiar with this lovely experience. Our minds welcome what they're familiar with and shy away from unfamiliar states. The better we get to know joy, the more easily our mind will find it in the future. It's a win-win situation. You can trust mindfulness to sort out any clinging.

At times you might feel some pleasant tingling sensations in your body. These are a manifestation of joy. Let your attention dwell there so as to strengthen this factor of enlightenment. And if at any stage you

sense gladness in your meditation, really let it rip. Relax into the experience and give yourself full permission to enjoy for as long as it lasts.

These last factors of tranquillity and joy make natural partners. Joy energises tranquillity, prevents us slipping off into a nice tranquil sleep. And tranquillity calms joy, preventing it from running off into excitement.

Before I finish, a word of warning. We can easily start beating ourselves up for not feeling all these beautiful factors of mind. When we're going through any of the hindrances, we can feel anything but joyful and equanimous. It needs the faith developed through long practice to trust that these factors are developing as we bear with the turmoil mindfully. Although we can't feel the factors in these situations, they're still contained within awareness. So long as we can maintain mindfulness, they're working away on our behalf, and we'll settle back into our minds and hearts when conditions are right.

As a quick recap on the factors of enlightenment, we have the image of wild geese in flight with their V-shaped formation. Mindfulness is in the lead, supported by three calming factors in the slipstream: concentration, equanimity, and tranquillity. On the wide flank, pushing ahead, we have the three stimulating factors: energy, investigation of Dhamma, and joy.

These qualities of mind and heart are being developed whenever we meditate. Some of these also come to our aid in daily life. Here the Buddha gives another list: the five spiritual faculties.

You'll not be surprised that mindfulness is here again. We slip into autopilot, not noticing anything about our surroundings or our inner life if we're not being mindful. We might be lost in daydreams and worries, not noticing how they're affecting our mood, posture, facial expression, tensions in the body. So first and foremost, we need to wake up, notice that we've been lost in thought, bring ourselves back to the here and now, knowing experience as it's happening. Mindful.

When we're mindful, we'll also be on guard against wrongdoing. If we've got into a heated argument and are shouting and swearing, it's very unlikely that we'll also be mindful—deliberately and consciously choosing to shout and swear. The moment we wake up and notice what we're doing, we'll start to calm down. The very discomfort of the body will deter us from continuing. So mindfulness protects us from going astray in daily life, keeps us on the path.

That's not to say that anger is always unwholesome. There may be occasions when we need to shout and swear. But very often it happens for relatively trivial matters because someone's pushed a button. And in these situations we need to find other ways of dealing with the energies of anger. Although this is a long and often painful journey, mindfulness is our saving grace, rescuing us from old habits, showing us the potential for change.

Just as in meditation, the balancing pair of energy and concentration support mindfulness in daily life. Energy here includes mental qualities like resolution and determination, as well as whatever physical

energy we need to accomplish our goals. We won't give up easily. But of course we can get over-energetic, doggedly following some fixed idea, not open to reason.

Say we've asked some friends around for tea. We decide to bake a cake for them. But everything goes wrong. We don't have any eggs and the local shop is out of eggs, so we have to drive ten miles to get some. Then we find we've run out of sugar and the mixer breaks down. Energy keeps us going, gets us through one problem after another. But we might still be beating eggs when our friends arrive, too frazzled to make them really welcome.

So energy needs to be balanced by concentration. This reminds us that the aim is to have friends to tea. Baking a cake is secondary—grand if it works, but let's focus on the important point: to make our friends welcome. Concentration has a calming effect, keeps us directed, focuses our energies on what is beneficial.

For daily life, we also need the support of faith and wisdom. Faith, Sharon Salzberg tells us, is not something you either have or have not. It's something you do. Faith in the Dhamma means to set your heart upon it.

We start with what can be termed blind faith, accepting the teachings as true even though we have no personal proof. As we practice and begin to see how we create suffering, how mindfulness reduces suffering, our initial blind faith turns to confidence in the teachings and gratitude for having received them. Faith, being a quality of the heart, warms up the teachings for us. We might develop a strong devotion towards the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, become more involved, be inspired to do our bit to support our local Sangha.

There is always the danger of losing ourselves in devotion, idealising the Buddha or a teacher rather than investigating whether the teachings are true in our own experience. Thus faith needs the balance of wisdom.

Wisdom starts with hearing or reading the Dhamma. It goes deeper when we reflect on this, thinking about how it applies to our life. The deepest wisdom comes from our meditation practice, where we experience the teachings as moment-to-moment reality.

The partnership of faith and wisdom is likened to a blind person who is energetic and strong pairing up with someone who is frail and crippled but with keen insight. The blind person symbolises faith, while the frail person symbolises wisdom. Wisdom sees where we want to go but lacks strength on its own. It needs the power and energy of faith to make the journey.

I think of faith and wisdom as a circle surrounding my life. They connect me with the world but also set limits. Within the circle I have energy and concentration, helping me do whatever tasks faith and wisdom have agreed upon. At the very centre is mindfulness, seeing how all this activity relates to my present experience.

I hope this talk has helped you understand the factors of enlightenment and how they relate to the spiritual faculties, which are the qualities we need and can develop in daily life. In both, mindfulness leads the way. Without mindfulness, our natural ability to know what is happening moment after moment, we backslide into old habits that lead to suffering.

To keep mindfulness sharp, it is backed up by concentration, the ability to focus, to rest attention on some aspect of experience. And energy, the willingness to keep on going no matter how hard it is. In daily life, this trio are further supported by faith and wisdom. In meditation, faith and wisdom keep developing with the aid of the twin supports of Dhamma investigation, the drive to see the truth for ourselves, and equanimity, the balance of mind that allows us to put up with what we dislike and resist unnecessary enticements. And their heartfelt expressions: joy, a lively curiosity in moment-to-moment experience, and tranquillity, the quiet ease that comes from sensing that all is well—we're on the path, heading for home.

May we soar like a flock of wild geese to liberation.

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