

# The Factors of Awakening

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Retreat Talks · 20 min read

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

Yesterday we tackled some of the worst hindrances we come across in meditation. All hindrances, of course, are as bad as one another. The fact is, every one of us has their own peculiar constellation, and there'll always be one or two that hang on till the end of time. Time governed by the self ends, of course, only with the fully awakened being.

However, what we find is that in *vipassanā*, although they are called hindrances, once they become objects to observe, they unwittingly become aids to our liberation. For by watching the hindrances do we come to understand how suffering arises and how it passes away.

This evening we're going to look at the brighter side of meditation, the factors of enlightenment. And we're going to start with a guided meditation so that you can actually experience these factors. None of them, unfortunately, are wow experiences. They are really quite ordinary states, heightened, no doubt, and directed at a certain investigation, that investigation of our interior life.

So as always, start with the body, energize the spine, get everything to relax and feel comfortable. Settling now on the feeling of the breath in the abdomen. Get in contact with it. Just observe and note it. Rising. Falling. Touching. But feel it. What does it feel like? How would you describe the feeling of it? Hopefully you'll say something like calm, gentle, soft, deep. If so, feel it, acknowledge it. But it could also be tight, coarse, short, unrelaxed. If so, just feel it, acknowledge it. Recognising these qualities is the factor of awareness, that knowing. Stay with these feelings now for a while, and of course, should the mind wander, just note it, what it's getting caught up in, and return to the breath.

Rising. Falling. Touching. Can you feel the calmness of the breath? Or, if it has been tight or agitated, that it's getting calmer? This is the quality of calmness. Perhaps you sense, surrounding these calm sensations, a general feeling of composure, even serenity. This is all the factor of tranquillity. It manifests as calmness in the heart, quietness in the mind and stillness in the body. Become aware of this general tranquility. Use a noting word such as calm, tranquil.

Now the danger here is that we develop this state for itself. There's nothing to be gained from this on the road to liberation. So we must now bring in another quality to balance it, and that is interest. Let's raise the interest to see more clearly, more precisely, what this process of breathing entails. Let's see if we can

distinguish some of the four great elements. Can we become more aware of the quality of movement, the air element, or a gentle pressure, the earth element, or maybe there are feelings of warmth or coolness, the fire element. We might even feel a certain elasticity in the movement, the water element. Use a noting word that you find most appropriate. It doesn't matter what you're aware of. Raise that interest to investigate.

Within the calmness and interest, we may have noticed a greater degree of focus and rise in our energy level. Let's reinforce this now by bringing in a deeper investigation of the Dharma. In the breath, we can become more aware of the quality of impermanence. But approach the breath in the position of don't know or not sure. This means there's no preconceptions in the mind, no prejudice, no expectations, no emotional distortions. This is the quality of equanimity. We need this to clarify our investigation.

So let's look a little more keenly, more deeply. How transient is the breath? Is the breath one thing, or is it made up of little segments? How small are these segments? To begin to see this, we need to be right there when the in-breath begins. Stay with the sensations all the way to the very end. Same with the out-breath. And in the pause, if we are still not steady, then turn our attention onto a touch point. But better if we can stay right there where we feel the breath.

It may be that as you raise the interest to see the quality of transience, the quality of calmness has diminished and you find yourself getting tight. If so, back off for a minute and feel the calmness in the breath. Go back for a while to the beginning of the exercise. Once there's tranquility re-established, restart the investigation. Remind yourself that all we have to do is to watch and observe. We're not trying to see something. We're not looking for something. We're just looking at what we are feeling and experiencing.

As we raised the desire to investigate, so the feeling of interest arose, and with it we were able to focus down, as it were, into the breath. That's another factor, focusing or concentration, being able to be still, to put the attention still on the object. And the only effort you need is to keep it still. This effort is another of the seven factors. It's a gentle but constant flow of energy supporting the interest, not the wish to become concentrated. The only effort needed is just to sharpen the looking, that's the focus, and to hold it there, steady. Let the strength of the attention grow of its own accord because of our interest to investigate the Dharma. Let our intention be simply to see, to feel the sensations, feel the feelings of the breath.

So now, let's begin again and focus in so that we can become more and more aware of the subtler feelings of the breath, the simple sensations. Get into the texture, their softness, perhaps a liquid quality, perhaps warmth, the movement, the ebb and flow, like the sway of the sea. The rise and fall of the in-breath and the out-breath.

So here we are, the body with its energized spine, everything relaxed, manifesting these two factors of effort and tranquility. The breath breathing softly, awareness, the knowing, noting, watching, feeling. The interest held in balance with tranquility rises to investigate the Dharma. Held objectively by equanimity, and the focus coming naturally, and the effort too, raised by our desire to know. So, now that all the

factors are there, let's forget all the instructions and everything we've heard. Let's just note and watch, feel and observe, investigate and examine.

So now we have an inkling of this other side of the equation, opposed to all the hindrances. These are the wonderful faculties and qualities we have, even if they do need a little developing.

I want to add to these seven factors of enlightenment the spiritual faculties. The faculties, the *indriya*, are faith, energy, awareness, concentration and wisdom. And the factors of enlightenment, the *bhojanga*, are awareness, investigation of the Dharma, effort, interest, tranquility, concentration and equanimity. I'm going to try and dovetail them so that you get an overall perspective of what we need to develop.

The first and ground of all spiritual qualities is faith. Faith here is not to be confused with belief. If what we mean by belief is an unqualified certainty in a statement, for instance, if I say, I believe in the teachings of the Buddha, there's a danger that I'll never question them, never want to really find out if they're true for me. I bask in the warm comfort of my belief. It can lead to gullibility. We'll believe anything the Buddha said just because he said it. It develops an intellectual deadness, emotional blindness, blind faith, and so on to fundamentalism.

No, what the Buddha meant by *saddhā* was confidence, putting one's trust in, in the same way that we may trust a doctor or a dentist. Faith is a trust which still allows an open, enquiring mind, and that leads to commitment and then to action, to taking the necessary steps. There was the case of Sāriputta, the person whom the Buddha had called the General of the Dharma, recognising him as second only to himself in understanding. Sāriputta declared that the Buddha was the most enlightened being ever. The Buddha asked him how he knew. Now no doubt Sāriputta was taken aback a little. He then explained he had come to intuit this from his own standpoint as a fully liberated being himself.

Yesterday we spoke of sceptical doubt, how this can become an insidious spiritual disease, a mental habit that stops us trusting, stops us committing and so acting. We saw how the reasons can be varied. It may be fear of commitment. Perhaps trust has been betrayed, so that we can't even trust ourselves. Or perhaps an underlying, unacknowledged aversion to religion, or whatever. Usually the person is unaware of the reason, and they justify, rationalize their doubt. They question and discuss only to prove the other wrong, and so justify their position. But the fact is, they never commit themselves to any path. And spiritually, their lives remain arid, infertile and unproductive.

As we have seen, sceptical doubt takes three forms. Doubt in the Buddha and his teachings, doubt in the teacher and doubt in oneself. It does happen that a person begins to doubt the teachings, not only those born into the religion, but even converts. I know of someone who decided after many years that Hinduism was for her. If she had said just that, that would have been understandable. Each of us is drawn in different ways. But she went on to say that Hinduism was a more advanced religion and that Buddhism only took you so far. That's another matter altogether. And such a statement tells us more about her practice and doubt than anything about the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism.

It's often true that we join a spiritual path with great expectations, some conceptual idea of what enlightenment is, for instance. And if these are not fulfilled, we can presume there's something wrong with the religion. I don't know what happened to her, but I wouldn't be surprised if she hasn't moved on again. So faith is the ability to trust, but not without discrimination.

So how do we arrive at this confidence in the first place? Well, by *paññā*, wisdom, not one's own, but the wisdom of others. We come to hear the teachings of the Buddha, and we awaken, as it were, to the truth. Faith begins then with some degree of intellectual agreement. It awakens in us some desire for spiritual knowledge. Wonder arises, an honest doubt, as it were. I wonder if it's true. Such a person begins to think about it, mulling it over, until, by their own intellectual effort, they have made it their own understanding. But it's still abstract, still conceptual, still stuck in the head.

If that spiritual desire has been truly awakened, it won't just stop there, but go on to investigate in a real way, they will begin to put into practice what they've come to understand. And this leads to direct experience to true realization of the way things really are. Only then is there any real change in the person. By this time it has become the true wisdom of personal experience. So it is that through these three degrees of received understanding, to personal intellectual understanding, to experiential understanding, that a person comes to realise the way things really are, as it's put in the scriptures. And underpinning these three levels is faith, confidence, trust and commitment.

Then there's that doubt in the teacher. Again, if it's skeptical doubt, based on an habitual inability to trust people, it will be a barrier to following the instructions. When someone suffers from skeptical doubt towards teachers, they say they can't find one, or they always have good reasons for going to someone else. There's a fear of being misled, conned, worse, ending up in a pit. How do we know when to trust someone? Well, this is one of the advantages of working within a tradition. Buddhism, like all world religions, has a long history and many witnesses, both ancient and present, who testify to the validity and effectiveness of the Buddha's teachings. Secondly, the teacher in a particular meditative tradition, such as the Mahāsi tradition, will have teachers themselves who have authorised, approved or encouraged them to teach. And thirdly, because there are other teachers in that tradition, a meditator can always attend their courses, and by way of comparison feel assured they're getting the teachings of that tradition. But we shouldn't forget that there are honest doubts, and these ought to be cleared up as quickly as possible.

There's also great danger at the other end of the scale, blind faith in a teacher, the my guru infatuation. There was a tale I heard told of Ajahn Chah, a famous Thai teacher. He went off to spend time with someone who had got the reputation of being fully enlightened. After a time, he became fairly convinced. But then one day, he happened to catch his teacher angrily giving a dog a great kick. Now, if you've been to Thai monasteries and suffered the packs of dogs, believe me, you'd have a lot of sympathy for that monk. It seems the dog had got to a choice piece of meat left by a supporter for the monks. Anyway, such anger didn't tally with the concept of *Arahat*, the fully enlightened being, liberated from greed, hatred and delusion. So it seems Ajahn Chah left.

So, be aware. It's always a disappointment to find out that your teacher is not quite the fully enlightened being you thought they were, and that occasionally they can be as stupid as yourself. Mind you, I think it's only natural to put our teachers on a pedestal and feel you have a right to some special intimacy with them. I've certainly done it. I remember I once smiled upon my teacher with that loving devotion of a devotee. To my hurt surprise, he turned away. I still didn't get the message. I placed my seat in front of his in the shrine room, and when I returned, he'd moved his to the other side of the shrine. I shall always be grateful to him for his gentle refusal to play guru.

Now there are people who form such intimate relationships of dependency that even when they're shown proof of criminality, believe it's been a set-up. Of course the guru knows what he's doing. This is not to say that the guru-teacher relationships cannot work. However, the Buddha himself discouraged any feelings of attachment to him, turning him into a guru. There was the case of a young monk who was obviously swooning of him, so he sent him off to the forest. That relationship gets in the way of the path of *gnosis*, the path of understanding. The Buddha's path is one of precise self-investigation and severe purification, as you know. The Buddha is not a guru, but an instructor. That's why in the Zen tradition, meditators are called trainees. The relationship of a trainee to the instructor is one of obedience, a word the modern self hates. Perhaps surrender is easier to understand, or perhaps to follow instructions is easier still. To follow with discrimination, that is.

In other words, all instructions are to be taken on the basis of trial and error. Any attachment to the teacher would get in the way of that clear comprehension. The opposite is true, of course, that the trainee has to see that any aversion towards the instructor is also a loss of impartiality on their part. The trainee should have no difficulty in questioning the instructions or in constructively criticizing them. The instructor should not be in authority over the trainee. That's to do with power and inspires only fear. They should be an authority for the trainee and inspire respect. A true willingness to follow the instructions given, not the instructor, should be a consequence of this respect.

Finally, there's doubt in oneself. Everyone else can do it. It's me. I just can't do it. I'm a born failure. When that emotional self-hatred, self-pity, low self-esteem, low self-confidence, when any of that arises, don't allow yourself to get caught up in it. How is it we can't believe the Buddha when he says everyone has the potential to become fully awakened and yet be happily prepared to guide our lives with such self-defeating thoughts? Okay, so we may not be spiritual geniuses. So what? There's no time limit put on this. We have as long as it will take. Slowly but surely, we'll advance, step by step. The path is gradual, and for the vast majority of us, very gradual. The Buddha warned us. So for heaven's sake, never put your faith in self-doubt. Don't believe the voices. As always, listen, feel, observe, experience and come to understand and affirm our natural human ability. I am able to become liberated. I ought to become fully awakened for my own sake and the sake of others. I want to, and I will become a fully awakened being.

So dealing with doubt is part of growing in faith. Until with that glimpse of the end of the path, we actually know for sure that the end of suffering is truly attainable. Upon reaching the first path and fruit, that of so

*tapanna*, stream entry as it is called, this faith, now based upon the direct experience of *Nibbāna*, becomes unshakable and is known as a power, *bala*. That faith has become a conviction based on personal experience. No more doubt as to the efficacy of the Buddha's teaching can arise again. Nor will there be any doubt as to the path leading to the final end of all our struggles.

Now *paññā*, this faculty of wisdom, which has grown along with faith, the one supporting the other, is an active, intuitive intelligence. And it is in this mode that it is included in the factors of enlightenment, the investigation of dharma, *dhammavicaya*. Here it needs a further support, and this is equanimity, *upekkhā*. Equanimity is even-mindedness, impartiality and suggests a calmness in the heart and non-attachment to what is going on. We expect judges to have both the wisdom and the equanimity factors highly developed. They're supposed to stand above the emotions of the crowd and not be fooled by the clever arguments of the lawyers. This is the attitude we have to have to all our interior life, if *paññā*, our intuitive intelligence, is going to see things as they really are.

So equanimity produces that ability to receive, to accept, to acknowledge without fear or favour, not distorted by anger and prejudice. It is the basic quality of the open heart and clear mind.

Supporting this pair, the heart, our emotional base, has to be both tranquil and yet joyous. Tranquility, *pasaddhi*, is that sense of calm and contentment, a peaceful heart. *Pīti* here is the joy of interest. Just think how happy we are when we're doing something we're really interested in. But the enemy of this spiritual joy is excitement. And excitement will immediately begin to corrupt the whole process once we've allowed some idea of getting, achieving, attaining to enter the practice. And that's what tranquility does. It keeps that joyous interest from becoming excited.

But tranquility also harbours a danger, and that's to draw us into a lovely, floaty, calm state, the land of lotus eaters. Well, it's all very beautiful, but where's it leading us? We don't realise where it's leading us till we come out of it, and we find it's leading us nowhere but to an attachment for that impermanent delight, yet another path to unsatisfactoriness. So again, it's all to do with balance. We need to develop calmness with a highly engaged interest.

Finally, there's the pair, which are both faculties and factors, effort and concentration. Concentration is a word which conjures up for us struggle, head down, knitted brow. Perhaps a better word is focus. It's the collected mind, a mind unscattered. It draws all the light in the mind into a laser beam, so to speak. The energy is simply that needed to bring this about. If we think of a camera, it can focus, concentrate on something near or far, and the motor which turns the lenses is the energy needed to get the focus we want. Once we've got the right focus, we can take the picture. We can note, feel, observe, experience and come to understand. We can't do it if the focus is fuzzy or intermittent. We've got to be able to hold that focus, and that's what this pair of concentration and effort do.

Again, they've got to be balanced. If there's more energy about than is needed, then that extra energy dissipates into restlessness. If we investigate the reasons for this, we may find the extra energy to be

empowered by self-centered desire. That same old problem of wanting to achieve something. Adversely, it may be that there's a lack of energy because the self isn't getting what it wants, so it gets bored and fed up. Whatever, we'll need to spend time calming and re-centering ourselves.

If the concentration is well developed and there's not enough energy to support it, then we fall into a state of unconsciousness. This isn't the same as sleep as such. When this happens to a meditator, the body remains quite still in position. When we're suffering from sloth, as I'm sure you all know, the body bobs up and down and occasionally collapses. The other sign is that when the meditator wakes up, as it were, they're fully bright.

This combination of focus and effort is well illustrated by the story of Soṇa. He knew himself to be one of the disciples exceptional in effort but he became discouraged by the lack of progress in his practice and decided to leave, build up a family and gather lots of good *kamma*. The Buddha by his supranormal powers came to know what he was thinking and appeared next to him. He embarrassed poor Soṇa by telling him what he was thinking of doing. He then asks if he played a *vīṇā* as a layperson. When the strings of your *vīṇā* were too taut, was your *vīṇā* in tune and playable? No, Lord, Soṇa replied. And when the strings of your *vīṇā* were too loose, was your *vīṇā* in tune and playable? No, Lord, Soṇa replied again. But when the strings of your *vīṇā* were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned at the right pitch, was your *vīṇā* in tune and playable? Yes, Lord. In the same way, Soṇa, too much energy and effort leads to restlessness. Overly slack effort and energy leads to laziness. Therefore, you should determine the right pitch of your energy and effort. This of course Soṇa did and in no longer time attained and remained in that supreme goal of the holy life.

So how do we do this? Well the trick that works for me is to let go of worrying about effort and trying to concentrate. Instead to draw my energies into raising interest and just watching. Consider, did you ever have any problems with concentration and effort when you were interested in something?

Finally there is *sati*, awareness. Now if there's one word which encapsulates the whole of the Buddha's teachings, at least in terms of the practice, it's got to be this one, *sati*, awareness. The establishing of this level of consciousness as a constant is the path to enlightenment. Indeed, to establish right awareness for one moment is to be awakened in that moment, though not fully mind. This, in fact, is all we're trying to do throughout this course, to put ourselves into *sammāsati*, helped by whatever technique possible, and to try to maintain it.

In *Vipassana Guidelines*, I've brought together various definitions that other teachers use. I can't remember now where I got them all from, but for me they come as close as you can get with words to describe what *sati* is. It is a bare attentiveness, simply watching all that arises and passes away. Now this is shorthand for the three characteristics. Impermanence is only one of them, and perhaps the most obvious to most people. But as we observe the transient nature of all phenomena we also come to see how suffering arises and passes away and how the self, the sense of self also arises and passes away.

It's a choiceless awareness. It doesn't choose what to observe, it just sits back as if in a cinema and just watches the show. It wants to understand the body, heart and mind as they really are, not as it would wish them to be, or thought they were. To do this, *sati* is an impartial observation. It's not judging, questioning, taking sides. It's not partisan. It's not coming from a fixed position, a view, an opinion. It's not biased or prejudiced. And when consciousness can so lift itself out of the morass of the psychophysical organism, it sets something free within itself. That enormous intelligence. The intuitive intelligence which we all have and which will lead itself eventually out of all suffering.

This intelligence isn't to be confused with cleverness. The cleverest are sometimes quite unwise. This intelligence is intuitive. It sees or it doesn't see. It is immediate. Words, concepts, emotions, moods, all distort its vision. That's why the purification of the heart and mind has to go hand in hand with the process of enlightenment.

It is this power of *paññā*, intuitive intelligence, that sees things as they really are. And it does it in an environment of *sati*, awareness, which paradoxically fully experiences every physical, emotional and mental event. It would be logical to think that if we detach ourselves from our emotions, looked at them as it were from a distance, that we wouldn't be able to feel them so much. But to our surprise, when we set ourselves in the mode of *satipaññā*, we feel emotions, sensations and thoughts in a very direct, intimate way.

It's a general experience of the newcomer to *vipassanā* that they suddenly experience the sense bases more keenly. Suddenly the sky really is blue. One meditator said it was the first time they'd ever really tasted potatoes. And how strong our emotional life is felt, and how we become aware of the chattering masses in our own mind.

What the Buddha discovered then was the awakening role of pure consciousness, its ability to free itself from the body, heart and mind, once it could perch itself firmly onto the post of observation. And he came to see that this *sammāsati*, this right awareness, was a controlling factor. It acted like the lead goose in a flight of geese. As it soared ahead, so the others followed. Right on its flanks flew interest and tranquility. They were further supported by right concentration and effort. And right behind awareness sits intuitive intelligence, itself supported by faith on the one flank and equanimity on the other. At any moment, this intelligence *paññā* can dart forth, as it were, and take a momentary lead. That ability to intuit the way things really are is always there as potential whenever right awareness is established.

So now, having gone through all the five *indriya*, the spiritual faculties, and the seven *bhojanga*, the factors of enlightenment, we've come to a point where we realize it was all unnecessary. All we have to do is establish right awareness and everything follows suit. The Buddha says it is enough to establish just that mindfulness so that direct insight can arise. So in a sense we can forget virtually everything I've just said and I feel a little embarrassed having wasted your time.

We can of course use this knowledge skillfully. We should eventually be able to pinpoint whatever

imbalance there is in our meditation. It may be one of the hindrances, but it could also be that there's just not enough effort, not enough concentration, too much effort, too much concentration, and so on. And here we would try to address the imbalance. This is all part of learning how to meditate, how to become more skillful in maintaining moment-to-moment mindfulness.

So let's pause here for a moment. One of the teachers in the order I belong to, who was the chief monk at the Lanka Meditation Centre in Colombo, and now has a park-like monastery near Kandaboda, which is the meditation centre I stayed in, once gave me this apt metaphor. He said that awareness was like a dewdrop on the end of a leaf, and the sun couldn't shine through it because it was all murky with dust, the dust it had collected while rolling down that leaf. If all the dirt could be removed, then the sun would shine through brightly. The dewdrop is, of course, our awareness and the sun, *Nibbāna*. So our job is to purify awareness and this is done by simply observing whatever arises within the field of that awareness. How simple!

Now I say simple, but we discover it's no easy thing to do. And that's why we've all come here for a week of hard sweatshop, to labour unceasingly at removing the dross, the accumulations of, dare we believe it, lifetimes of unskillful behaviour. But all is not darkness. We do have good qualities, wonderful qualities, and it's these we are developing at enormous speed when we undergo a special training like this. So take heart. The path is long, but there are many delights on the way. For instance, think of the ecstasy you'll feel when this course is over.

Remember Socrates, the unexamined life is not worth living. Here's the Buddha from the Dhammapada, a collection of sayings. Only foolish and ignorant people indulge mindlessness. The wise guard their mindfulness as the greatest of all treasures.

May your unflagging devotion to the development of all the faculties and factors of enlightenment bear great fruit. May you be fully awakened sooner rather than later.

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