

Factors for Awakening

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Several years back I was asked to give a talk on the factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. And it turned out that the people who'd organized the event had asked for that topic under the impression that the factors for awakening were a description of the awakened mind, the goal toward which we were aiming. Whereas they're actually a path leading to awakening.

Part of the misunderstanding was based simply on the question of how to translate the Pali term *bojjhanga*: "awakening-factors." Because it's a compound, it could be factors *of* awakening, but if you actually look at how these factors are explained in the texts, the meaning of the term is very much factors *for* awakening. These are qualities of mind you develop in order to become awakened. It's not that you can clone the awakened state. You're working on everyday factors of the mind that eventually will lead to awakening.

This is one of the important aspects of the Buddha's teaching: The path to awakening is built out of very ordinary, day-to-day things, like mindfulness and alertness. It's simply that when you learn how to look at them in a new way, to analyze them in a new way, and to use them in a new way, they can take you all the way to awakening.

This is especially important when you look at the second factor for awakening, analysis of qualities, which is the heart of the set. As the people who'd arranged that event said, their impression of the factor was that in the awakened mind everything is just mental qualities arising, passing away, arising, passing away, with a great lightness. You see these things coming and going, coming and going, and they don't weigh on the mind anymore. Which *is* a stage of the path, but to look at the factor in that way misses out on a very useful aspect of what the factor's all about. When the Buddha talks about developing that factor, he says it's a matter of paying appropriate attention to what's skillful and what's not. And then, based on that factor, you develop the next factor: which is persistence in actually developing what's skillful and abandoning what's not.

So instead of trying to clone yourself into a very rarefied state, the Buddha's asking you to look very carefully at what you're doing. You apply appropriate attention to what you're doing in body, speech, and mind, but especially mind, to see how skillful your actions are. We often describe appropriate attention as looking at things in terms of the four noble truths, but that level of appropriate

attention builds on another level of appropriate attention, which is simply seeing what's skillful and unskillful, judging what you're doing by the results of what you're doing.

This involves questioning. It's not simply a matter of conviction, although the simple fact that you're going to follow this path of looking at what's skillful and unskillful requires that you be convinced that the Buddha knew what he was talking about—that, and conviction that there are wise people who've been trained in this path and who know what they're talking about. Because when the Buddha asks you to look at what's skillful and unskillful in general terms—as when he's talking to the Kalamas—he says that it's not simply a matter of judging things in your own experience but also of taking into account the teachings of the wise, people whose behavior you've looked at and you've learned to trust.

As the Buddha shows in his instructions to Rahula, you don't just look at your own actions and then come to conclusions about them. If you find that you've made a mistake or done something harmful, you go talk to somebody else who's more advanced on the path. In other words, you seek the counsel of the wise. So it's a matter partly of looking for yourself and partly of taking into account the advice that you get from people who have more experience on the path.

But in the ultimate analysis, it does come down to your willingness to look at your actions, to see where they're causing you suffering and to ask yourself questions: “Okay, where is this suffering? Exactly what am I stressed out about?” You may have some general knowledge on the basic principles that stress comes from craving and clinging, but the Buddha wants you to go beyond general principles. He wants you to see specific things arising and passing away: “When does the stress come? When does it get intensified? When does it weaken? What else happens in the mind at the same time that it's intensifying? What else is happening at the same time it's weakening?” That's applying appropriate attention.

Now, to do this, of course, you need to develop the other factors for awakening, starting with mindfulness. Mindfulness, in the Buddha's sense of the term, means keeping something in mind. Right mindfulness means keeping in mind your resolve to stay with the body or with feelings or with mind states or with mental qualities, in and of themselves, as your primary frame of reference. The word *primary*, here, is important, because there's no way you're going to be focused on the body without noticing feelings or noticing mind states or noticing mental qualities. After all, they all come together right here. This is why the Buddha says that you can focus on any of the four and follow it all the way to

awakening. You choose one of them as being primary and then you relate the other three to that primary one.

For instance, right now we're with the breath, which is the frame of reference that the Buddha recommends most specifically for dealing with all four frames. When feelings come up, relate them to the breath. How does the breath affect the feelings? How do the feelings affect the way you breathe? For instance, if there's a pain in your body, do you tend to breathe in a way that walls off the pain so that it doesn't spread? We do have a sense of the breath spreading but we don't like the idea of the pain spreading, so we tense up around it so that it doesn't spread along with the breath. If you find yourself doing that subconsciously, ask yourself, "What if I deliberately think of the breath going through the pain? Can I open up that part of the body?" In this way, you keep the breath as primary and then the pain becomes secondary, simply related to the breath.

The same principle applies to mind states. Certain mind states are fostered by tense or constricted breathing. Other more skillful states are fostered by a sense of breath that flows thoroughly throughout the body, refreshing the body. You want to notice that and take advantage of it.

Now notice, we're not simply staying with the breath or feelings or mind states simply as they are. We're trying to do something skillful with them. This counts as the quality of ardency that, as part of right mindfulness, the Buddha also has you keep in mind. If you see that a certain way of breathing, a certain feeling, or a certain mind state is leading to unskillful thoughts, words, or deeds, change it. If any of these things lead to skillful thoughts, words, and deeds, you maintain them and try to develop them.

It's not that these tools we develop as part of right mindfulness are for use only while we're here sitting with our eyes closed. They're meant to be used throughout the day. Somebody says something and you notice a catch in the breath: You can take that as a warning sign that something's going on in the mind as well. You've reacted to what that person has said. And if you have the time, you want to look into it. If you don't have time, just make a mental note and then try to breathe through whatever tension has developed in the breath so that you're not carrying that little bit of tension around with you for the rest of the day.

Otherwise, it acts like a magnet. It attracts other little bits and pieces of tension until you've got a huge armor or a huge cluster of tension that's invaded the body. And then there's the problem of how you get it out. Whereas it's a lot easier if you begin to notice the little pieces as they come and you can breathe right through them to make them go. That's the function of what the Buddha calls mindfulness as a governing principle: As you're anchored with the breath in

the present moment, you *make* good things come and stay, and you make bad things go.

This puts you in a better position to look at the mind. Again, your basic foundation is the breath, but then you look at the mind from the position of a very comfortable, very refreshing, very fulfilling way of breathing. And you see the mind in a very different light than if you were looking at it from a feeling of being all tensed, tight, and wound up.

So that's mindfulness.

As you practice mindfulness in this way, you're already beginning to develop analysis of qualities, seeing which mind states or which breath states or breath patterns are skillful and which ones are not. And you learn how to foster the skillful ones. This is another area where conviction comes in. As the Buddha says, if it weren't possible to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones, he wouldn't have taught it. And if it weren't for the fact that you would benefit from developing skillful ones and abandoning unskillful ones, he wouldn't have taught that, either. And you need to have conviction that he knows what he's talking about.

But this factor of analysis of qualities is very much a path factor, not a factor to arrive at. It's what enables you to see what needs to be done. Then, based on that, you develop the factor of persistence, which is the same as ardency and right effort. And to encourage right effort, it's good to develop heedfulness, realizing that you really do need to develop skillful qualities. You can't wait until tomorrow or next week or next month or next year. You need to do this *now*. After all, you could die at any moment. Not just physical death: Your goodness could die at any moment. Something could come up, either a thought about something that someone has done or said, or an actual event right here right now that could catch you off guard, and you could do or say things that are really harmful. That can happen at any time. So you have to be careful. You have to be heedful all the time.

When you're heedful like this, the other factors come in, the factors that show how mindfulness and discernment—the first two factors—lead to concentration. There's the rapture that comes as the mind gets more and more full, as your sense of the breath energy gets more and more full. You're not wounding it with unskillful thoughts, unskillful attitudes, or unskillful ways of breathing. From that there's calm; from calm there's concentration. And when the mind is concentrated and calm, it can look at things with a more solid sense of equanimity.

As the Buddha said, there are levels of equanimity. The lowest level is what he calls equanimity based on diversity. You simply make up your mind that whatever

comes up in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas, you're going to try to stay non-reactive. That kind of equanimity can be maintained as long as you maintain your mindfulness and your will to be non-reactive.

A lot stronger, though, is the equanimity that the Buddha says is based on unity or unification, i.e., when the mind really settles down and is one. With that sense of calm, well-being, and fullness, you feel less touched by events, because you've got something much better to feed on. You're not going out nibbling off other people's words or devouring sensual pleasures, because you've got something much better right here. It's not simply a matter of willing yourself not to react. You don't feel any *need* to react.

But we're not practicing these things just to arrive at equanimity. That's another problem with seeing the awakening factors as a map of the enlightened mind. Because people think, "Well, all you do is arrive at equanimity and there you are: nibbana." But that's not the case. Nibbana is the ultimate happiness. Equanimity is part of the path. You gain equanimity toward all the things that are not important in life so that you can keep analyzing that issue of what's skillful and unskillful in the mind.

What the Buddha's doing is putting you in a position where your happiness depends more and more on one thing: the good qualities of the mind, the mind as it's trained. You then use this sense of well-being to pry away your attachments to other things. Because as you can see: When you do this sort of action, bodily or verbal, you get these results; when you foster this quality of mind you get these results; and when you foster *that* quality of mind, you get other kinds of results. And you get more and more sensitive to where there's stress. Then you know what to do. Again, you have to look at the particulars so that you can apply a precise solution.

This is why analysis of qualities is *the* central factor here. You're looking at events. The word *dhamma*, qualities, can also mean events or actions, and here we're particularly looking at mental actions. Look at your actions and see what you're doing: where there's stress; what you did to aggravate that stress; what you could do to get rid of it, to undercut it, i.e., how you abandon the cause. You follow these questions all the way to the questions about wherever there's anything that's inconstant, it's stressful; wherever there's anything that's stressful, it's to be regarded as not-self, something to let go, let go, let go.

But all of these qualities working together are needed to take you to awakening. If you try to do the letting go without having developed concentration, the insights can get very dry and very alienating. I've heard of

people letting go of their sense of self prematurely and getting very disoriented as a result. They think, “Wow, I’ve let go of my sense of self so it must be awakening.” But it’s not. It’s destabilizing. They’ve cut away all the tools they need in order to stay on the path. After all, you do need a sense of self to function on the path: a wise sense of self, a skillful sense of self, which you’ve been developing as part of the path. You let it go only when you don’t need it anymore. And part of that sense of self is the state of well-being that comes when you get the mind into good strong concentration.

So all these factors are needed.

But it’s important to remember that they *are* the path. You’re not trying to clone awakening. You’re not trying to will the mind into some expansive, wonderful state. The path to awakening is followed in little tiny incremental steps, looking at each of your actions and every instance of stress as it comes up. The more precisely you can see these things, the more clearly you can see exactly where you’re causing suffering and how you can stop. Seek the counsel of the wise when you need it. But otherwise stay focused right here on the particulars.

It’s through the particulars that you break through to a state that’s totally unlimited, and not defined in any way at all. It’s called freedom because, in reaching that state, we’re freed from our defilements. In other words, it’s called freedom as a comparison, but in and of itself it can’t properly be described. That’s a sign of how special it is.