

The Seven Factors of Awakening - Lecture 6

Over the past several weeks, we have been discussing a teaching of the Buddha's from the Pali Canon known as the seven factors of awakening. For our study of this teaching, I will be referencing the teaching offered by Christina Feldman and Jaya Rudgard.

The seven factors of awakening are mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, composure or collectedness and equanimity. In our discussion about this teaching, we have also talked about the five hindrances or the five veiling factors, qualities that act to obstruct our weakening. The five veiling factors are sense desire, ill will, restlessness or agitation, dullness or drowsiness and doubt. The awakening factors can act as antidotes to the veiling factors.

Trying to hold both of these teachings, these lists, in mind can be challenging at first. Hopefully, as we explore each of the awakening factors in turn,, we can begin to know each one in our experience with some familiarity, and to experience as well the ways in which they can act as an antidote to the qualities that hinder our awakening. Hopefully this will give us a vocabulary, a literacy if you will, for the thoughts, feeling and moods we experience as they arise, allowing us to encourage those that are skillful and wholesome, that lead to our awakening, as well as the ability to recognize, identify and transform unskillful, unwholesome thoughts as they arise.

The first four factors of awakening that we have explored so far, mindfulness, investigation, energy and joy, can be seen as

energizing factors of awakening. The last three awakening factors, tranquility, collectedness and equanimity can be understood as the calming elements of awakening factors. This evening, we will focus our attention on the tranquility, known in Pali as “*passaddhi*.”

I admit that tranquility is not a word I often use, nor a quality I particularly focus on in practice. I think of calm, I think of ease, I think of contentment, all of which have some role to play in tranquility. While tranquility includes these qualities it is a more steady-state condition. Tranquility is akin to serenity, a deep inner stillness and repose. In the Fukanzazengi, Dogen states that zazen is the Dharma Gate of repose and bliss. Tranquility is part of practice, and its characteristics are worth exploring.

About this quality of tranquility, Jaya Rudgard says:

In our culture, I think the quality of tranquility is often undervalued. We live in a culture that thrives on stimulation and excitement. We're also encouraged by the media and our capitalist system to be constantly discontented and in search of the next hit of excitement or happiness. We tend to undervalue or underrate the contentment and simplicity that leads to the satisfying and steady happiness of tranquility.

It is important to appreciate that tranquility is not about being passive or untouched by our life or environment. It is about not being merely reactive, not repeating unhelpful responses. Tranquility is an antidote to all of the veiling factors save for dullness. It can act as a balanced response to sense desire, ill

will, agitation and doubt. Thoughts that arise from agitation and ill will easily enter our speech and actions. They may lead to very impulsive, reactive responses. Tranquility can also be an antidote to the proliferation of agitated thinking, known in Pali as “*papanca*.”

Christina Feldman comments:

So when we undertake this journey of tranquility, we're learning to calm and bring tranquility into those patterns of proliferation, obsession, and preoccupation that can make the mind and heart feel such an unfriendly place to be.

It's also being aware that this proliferation is the stuff of self-making. This is how we form our view of who we are: "I'm an angry type," or "I'm an aversive type," or "I'm an anxious type," or "I'm an agitated type." None of us are types. But we see when these patterns are not met with the awakening factors how they become almost default mechanisms. This is what we're learning to calm. This is what we're learning to bring tranquility into.

This is a challenge for us. We're stimulation-bound beings. Our attention is often stimulation-bound. We can have addictions to excitement and drama and intensity and rely upon those events to make us feel awake, to make us feel alive. Tranquility is really quite a radical alternative, a radical response to those addictions, which are almost force-fed into us from the times when we're very young.

When we find ourselves caught up in mental agitation or ill will, when we experience discomfort with what is happening in the moment, rather than be mindful of our thoughts in order to find an antidote to transform an unwholesome thought into a more skillful or wholesome thought, we instead seek a distraction or an amusement that deflects our attention from the situation. The distraction may be interior; it may manifest as a story we tell about ourselves, or as an obsessive pattern of thoughts and reactions. The distraction can be exterior, an amusement, or picking up a device with a screen. Because distractions appear to offer us some ease from an uncomfortable situation, we can become enchanted with their power.

We can, however, cultivate a certain disenchantment with the patterns and activities that easily draw us out of moment into spaces that either amplify our opinions and beliefs or remove us entirely from the moment by offering an alternative reality.

Christina Feldman says this about disenchantment:

... I think tranquility actually begins with a word that wouldn't be very popular in our culture, which is disenchantment. This disenchantment is not a rejection of the world, or wonder, beauty, and awe. Disenchantment in my mind is a withdrawal of projected promise. We project onto events, intensity, and excitement this power to make us happy, to make us feel alive. It's almost as if we get up in the morning and look at the world and other people, and say, "Make me feel alive, make me feel happy."

So disenchantment is a surrender or yielding of that belief system that says we are so empty of inner aliveness and inner calmness that we must be always at the mercy of sensory pursuit. Tranquility has something to do with disenchantment, allowing, in my mind, a true sense of wonder to emerge with the calming of that need for event-making and intensity.

A second quality that we can develop that leans toward tranquility is restraint, another not very popular word in our culture. When we are caught up in moments of craving or anger, when we find ourselves prowling about for distraction or stimulation, or when caught up in agitation and worry, we can, with mindfulness, recognize that this is not a moment of happiness or skillfulness, and that we have the capacity to cultivate a different response. Restraint is “a gift we offer the world.”

Tranquility is not a quality that we are either born with or not. It is a quality that we can enhance over time. With mindfulness of our mental activity, we can intervene before becoming immersed into thoughts of desire, anger and agitation to allow for the possibility of a different, more wholehearted response.

We have talked before about the three poisons, greed, anger and delusion, that lead to our suffering and the suffering of other beings as well. The veiling factors, sense desire, ill-will, worry or agitation, drowsiness and doubt, are the visible faces of the three poisons as they manifest in our lives. The Buddha often described the experience of being caught in greed, anger and delusion by likening it to being on fire. The way to stop the fire is to stop

feeding it more fuel. That's simple. That's obvious. But we must be paying attention to what is arising in mind at this moment. We must be equipped to recognize its quality: is this leading to wakefulness, to liberation, to wholeheartedness or not. Do we wish to feed this fire or not? The language of the awakening factors and the veiling factors are offered to help us navigate the mental landscape, to recognize what is skillful and what is not, so that we can awaken and benefit all beings.

We have talked before about the Buddhist teaching that the mind is the forerunner of all things. The world we create begins in our minds; the character of the world reflects the character of our thoughts. By becoming familiar with the factors of awakening as well as the veiling factors, we begin to know the mind. These teachings help us to pay attention to thoughts as they arise, identify their character, and respond with skill. When we learn to recognize and identify the qualities of our thoughts, we are no longer a passive bystander to the theater arising in our minds, but we can become an active shaper of our thoughts, fueling those we find wholesome and beneficial while starving those that are harmful.

Nyanaponike Thera, a Theravaden Buddhist monk and scholar of the last century, taught three steps needed on the path of awakening. The first step is to know the mind. The second step is to shape the mind. And the third step is to liberate the mind."

The first step is to continue developing this literacy of knowing the mind of the moment, knowing the heart of the

moment, knowing these weather patterns, knowing when the awakening factors are present. This is a very simple knowing, a developing of this inner "insight literacy." It's not conceptual. It's not simply thinking about it. Know what this veiling or awakening factor feels like. Know how it lands in the body and the mind. Know it almost to your bones. The first step is developing this knowing, and we see how important both mindfulness and investigation are in this.

The second step is to shape the mind. Our mind is being shaped by the skillful or unskillful in every moment. Our mind is being shaped by the wholesome or by the unwholesome. Our mind is being shaped by the liberating or by the confusing. This is simply the reality. We do not live with one mind; we live within a mind that is a process. This process is being shaped profoundly by conditions, and these conditions are both the veiling factors and the awakening factors.

We begin to know what is shaping the mind but instead of feeling like a passive observer we realize that, through cultivating the awakening factors, we are again and again shaping a mind that's toward awakening. We recognize that the shape of our mind does indeed become the shape of our world. These veiling factors that we've spoken about are not just internal experiences. When our minds are shaped by ill will, we see a world of imperfection and ill will. When our mind is shaped by agitation or restlessness and worry, we see and live in a fearful world.

The third step: liberating the mind

So we learn that we can intentionally shape the mind with the awakening factors. Beginning to taste this freedom, moment to moment, we liberate the mind. And here Nyanaponika is not talking about one singular dramatic moment of liberating the mind but this ongoing process of awakening the mind, liberating it from the grip of all patterns that bind us to confusion and distress.

By knowing our thoughts as they arise, understanding them in terms of whether or not they lead to our awakening is the first step toward liberation. A fluent, experiential knowing of the awakening factors and the veiling factors offers us a working vocabulary, a literacy, to evaluate the content of mind, to know it as wholesome or unwholesome, skillful or unskillful. As we learn to orientate our minds toward the awakening factors, we can begin to shape our mind. We come to appreciate that we are not passive bystanders to the theater of our thoughts, but active participants in the content of mind. We can learn to become disenchanted with the power of our habitual responses. We can practice restraint. Learning to know our mind, we can begin to shape its content and find liberation. And as we move through the energetic aspects of the awakening factors, mindfulness, investigation, energy and joy, we can come to know the calmer aspects of awakening, beginning with tranquility.

Resources:

The Seven Factors of Awakening, Tricycle Course, Christina Feldman and Jaya Rudgarn, Unit 6.

