

Mindfulness of Breathing (47) Tranquility Factor of Awakening

March 6, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

tranquility, nourishing, tranquil, joy, happiness, Seven Factors of Awakening, wholeness, well-being, peaceful, alertness, unification, *pīṭi*, *samādhī*, *kusala*, Barre, bright, drink

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We are continuing to discuss the Seven Factors of Awakening. Following the joy factor, we come to the tranquility factor of awakening. In the teachings of the Buddha, this pattern repeats itself many times. First, there is joy, and then there is tranquility.

One of the common phrases in the *suttas* is:

*When the mind is joyful, the body becomes tranquil.
And when the body is tranquil, there arises
happiness.*

I can't tell you exactly how this works. It depends a bit on what we think joy is.

I think it is very reassuring to begin to experience feelings of delight, joy, happiness, and goodness in

meditation. It is reassuring that something can release and relax: “This is good. I’m here. I’m starting to be home. This is a good place to be. It’s okay not to be running around searching, wanting, fighting, resisting, and hoping. It’s okay to be reassured – just to be here, settled, and relaxed.”

The function of tranquility on the Buddhist path of meditation is not tranquility for its own sake, but tranquility for the sake of happiness. Joy precedes tranquility, and that opens up the possibility for deeper happiness. Perhaps each of us has a different idea of what happiness means. But it is something that opens up throughout the body. Happiness is often considered to be an embodied feeling of contentment, warmth, and goodness – enabled by tranquility.

Tranquility is meant to spread throughout the body – to open up the body – so the tensions of the body are not holding things in check. As the body opens up more and more, and we begin to feel and open to the body, there is more room for well-being. This embodied sense of well-being does not depend on what is happening in the world. It does not depend on having our desires met or receiving a positive evaluation. It does not depend on someone praising us or having worldly success. It comes from a state of mind and body into which we have settled in a meditative way.

It is not easy to experience this. In terms of the Seven Factors of Awakening, tranquility is step five. Just as with *ānāpānasati* – whether we know it or not – we’re moving through these factors. Different factors are salient on different days.

I think that percentage-wise, the average meditator spends much of their time on the first factor – mindfulness. They spend somewhat less time with investigation and effort, and even less time feeling joy, tranquility, and happiness. Less time is spent feeling *samadhi* (concentration) and equanimity.

I am saying this so we don’t set ourselves up thinking that it has to be linear, or there has to be more and more of the good stuff. Meditation has a lot to do with starting over, working with what we have and what’s going on. Then slowly, we might find ourselves developing and moving in the direction that the Seven Factors of Awakening are pointing to.

In the mid-1970s, when the first American *vipassanā* teachers in our lineage were establishing *vipassanā* in the United States, they were looking for a retreat center. They came across a closed monastery in the small town of Barre, Massachusetts. As they were driving through town to see the place, they saw a little statue commemorating the colonial times or the Revolutionary War. On it was the motto of the town: “Tranquil and

Alert.” They said, “Oh, this is our place. This is the place for our meditation center: ‘Tranquil and Alert.’”

Certainly, the tranquility that comes with alertness – not bright, energetic alertness, but clear and simple alertness, being *here*, being present – is what is needed. Not the kind of tranquility where we get lethargic, dull, or start falling asleep. This is a danger with tranquility. It is easy to linger, rest, and indulge in it in a way that it becomes soporific, putting us to sleep.

The art of meditation is to be able to stay alert and clear while being in deep tranquility. That is why I like the metaphor – an image for tranquility – of a lake early in the morning. At dawn, the air is completely still, quiet, and very clear. Everything on the surface of the lake is also still, quiet, peaceful, and completely clear. This is the clarity that comes with tranquility.

When there is a lot of tranquility, it is important to bring the factors of awakening into balance. A little more energy might be needed to keep the clarity. One function of the joy factor is to keep a bit of brightness there, so that the mind can be soft, light, and bright at the same time.

We are tracking ourselves. In any meditation state, it is very important that there be some nourishing qualities present. There is an art to not indulging in them, not

resting in or savoring them. But also allowing ourselves to be nourished by them. Allowing ourselves to feel their goodness, without leaning into or holding on to them, or becoming complacent with them.

As people get calmer in meditation and a lot of their tensions and anxieties settle down, it is very easy to fall into complacency and to be content to feel calm and relaxed. The mind wanders off and falls asleep because there is not really the bright practice of engagement. So *bright* tranquility, serenity, and peace come along. We are bright, tranquil, and alert.

As I've said already, for the Buddha, each of the factors of awakening has something that nourishes it. In the case of tranquility: "Tranquility nourishes tranquility." If you want to be tranquil, find tranquility – because it feeds and influences us.

Some people find tranquility in the places they go to. There are, believe it or not, tranquil buildings. I used to go into some of the churches in Europe when I lived there. I would sit quietly. Some churches were quite tranquil and peaceful. It was wonderful, in the hustle and bustle of town, to come across a church. I'd go in, and it would be so peaceful. I'd sit there for a while and take it in. It was nourishing to take it in.

Many people associate tranquility with places in nature. Even a very small park can be a tranquil place. Yesterday, I was in a park at a place with a few trees. I thought, “This is a peaceful place.” It was nice to be there and take it in.

Tranquility may be found with a cup of tea. Just contentedly drink the tea. Drink the tea as if this is meant to be a place to drink...tranquility. *Pīṭi* is the word for “joy” in Pali. It also means to “drink” – nourishment, drinking in something.

Can you support yourself with tranquility as you sit and meditate? Or do you leave it to chance? Do you gamble that, “Today, I’m going to sit down, and maybe there will be some tranquility?”

Do you sit down in a place that is tranquil? Sometimes people find that straightening their room before they meditate supports a little more tranquility – having a clean, rather than a messy, room. Take some time to value tranquility and calm. Sit down and see if there is any tranquility here.

“Tranquility nourishes tranquility.” The ability to recognize tranquility allows us to feel it when it is here and to avail ourselves of it. I love the term “nourishment” – to be nourished by this. It goes along with translating *kusala*, the Pali word for “skillful,” as “wholesome.”

Wholesome implies that something is healthy and nourishing for us – wholesome bread, for example.

On this Buddhist path, we are nourishing ourselves with what is wholesome. That is a very different paradigm for meditation practice than the acquisitive paradigm: “I’ve got to do it. I’ve got to work at it – get concentrated, make something happen, and get something to happen to me.” There can be a lot of unhealthy, unnourishing attitudes that we bring to meditation.

Is there a nourishing attitude? Is there an attitude of: “Do this practice; engage in our life; live our life?” – so that the very way we live feels nourishing, wholesome, supportive, and onward leading?

Each of the factors of awakening is onward leading. With tranquility, your practice is not a dead end. When you are practicing mindfulness and sitting sincerely, tranquility itself is an onward leading support to go on to happiness and contentment. This then becomes a support for *samādhi*, for concentration.

If we take *samādhi* to be the unification of mind, where we have a feeling of becoming whole, then tranquility allows us to be at ease in our whole body and mind. Tranquility supports us to be really centered and here in a deep way – without the tensions, conflicts, and divisions that prevent us from feeling wholeness. We

then understand how being tranquil is a support for the feeling of wholeness or unification that comes with *samādhi*.

Samādhi will be the topic for tomorrow. For now, you are left with tranquility. It can't be that bad. Thank you.