

Dhammas (4 of 5) Seven Factors of Awakening

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The topic today is the Seven Factors of Awakening, the seven limbs of awakening. I like the expression “limbs of awakening” because it connects them to our lived body. The seven factors are embodied, although the words seem to imply just a list. They are seven qualities or states of being that get activated in a very nice way as we get into the groove, into the flow of meditation practice. They are like the reward of meditation, once you are really able to put aside distractions and get focused on just being here in the flow of the present moment steadily and continuously.

In the ancient texts, the seven factors are contrasted or paired up with the five hindrances as opposites that have the opposite effect on us. The task is to put the five hindrances to sleep or let go of them, and to awaken the Seven Factors of Awakening.

The five hindrances are said to be forces that obscure wisdom. They obscure a clear vision of what's happening. They blind us to our clarity, our wisdom, and our good understanding, whereas the Seven Factors of Awakening are the opposite. They bring forth clarity of vision, clarity of wisdom, and a kind of aliveness. The hindrances are rather deadening in a certain way.

Our practice goes from the world of being caught up in hindrances to the world of coursing in the Seven Factors of Awakening. As the practice proceeds, at some point, the seven factors wake up, and then it's good to recognize them. The recognition of them supports them to grow even more. They are a little bit like a cheerleader who cheers you on: "This is really good! You're on track!"

The way that I have presented the fourth foundation of mindfulness, the first three exercises are about progressively coming to terms with, letting go of, and settling down coarser to more refined or deeper forms of attachment and preoccupation. The practice has a lot to

do with seeing the preoccupations, the hindrances, the attachments, and the entanglements we have so that we're no longer entangled or caught in them. We begin waking up and become free of them.

As that freedom begins to unfold and we are no longer caught in these things, then the Seven Factors of Awakening begin to show up. It's a beautiful thing to practice present moment awareness and really get into the groove of it, and then feel the arising of these very healthy, wholesome, wonderful states. In some ways, they feel impersonal, while attachments, entanglements, identifications, and the hindrances have a very strong stickiness, where we get caught up in our egoistic ideas or our sense of self and agency.

Even though our practice is what brings them about, and it feels as if the Seven Factors of Awakening are definitely arising from within us, there is a beautiful quality of naturalness to them. It is almost as if this is what happens when we get out of our own way and are less focused on me, myself, and mine. It is quite encouraging to feel these healthy states bubbling up and coursing through us. They encourage us to have a positive, appreciative disposition towards life and what is possible. They bring a feeling of health.

In fact, it was very clear in the ancient world that the Seven Factors of Awakening were considered a kind of

medicine. For example, when the Buddha was sick, he asked a monk to recite the Seven Factors of Awakening, almost like a guided meditation, to help arouse him or heal his sickness. Sometimes when the Buddha went to see a sick monastic, he would recite the Seven Factors of Awakening.

This is for people who are familiar with them, who are coursing in them, and they are a regular part of their lives. When the seven factors are named, they come alive, and good energy comes up that is considered healing energy. When I've had them coursing through me, the best description I had was that I felt as if there was healing fluid coursing through all my veins and nerves. The sense of healing that came with the Seven Factors Awakening was remarkable.

The seven factors are mindfulness, investigation, energy or strength, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Sometimes they are presented as a progression. As mindfulness gets stronger, at some point we get the clarity of investigation. We see more clearly what's here. As we see more clearly, it's easier to evoke a good sense of strength, energy, and enthusiasm for the practice, so we engage more fully. It has become second nature to feel, "Oh yes, let's do this." As we engage, then joy arises. At one point joy is felt strongly, but when we're settled in the joy, something

can settle and relax. Then tranquility sets in, and the joy becomes more like happiness than joy.

Well-being and tranquility are the ideal conditions for concentration to arise. It is hard to get concentrated from an ordinary state of mind where you're walking around preoccupied, and you have the idea that you're supposed to have a laser focus and work really hard at getting concentrated. It is a lot easier if one prepares the ground for concentration. The first five factors of awakening are part of the preparation that allows us to get unified, stable, and rooted here.

Lastly, there is equanimity. Equanimity can seem kind of uninteresting, but it is like a very pristine emotional state. It feels clean and peaceful. Equanimity is the pinnacle of the most fantastic emotional states that you can feel. The mind is so balanced and nonreactive, with a beautiful sense of cleanliness, clarity, and openness. The mind is not going to react to anything anymore. It's just there, and there is a feeling of strength.

The Seven Factors of Awakening can appear as little hints at first, and it's helpful to recognize them, "Oh, this is it, this is it." Probably some of you have them arising in everyday life as well. You can recognize that the seven factors are present even in ordinary activities of life that you really get focused on and enjoy doing, like cooking. You can really get into cooking and let the

world drop away. There can be a real sense of presence and the attentiveness of investigation, where you are attending to the food – tracking it carefully, knowing how much more seasoning to put in, how long it needs to cook, or when to turn down the flames. There can be delight and a sense of joy. Everything gets kind of tranquil. The cares of the world fall away. It can be peaceful to just cook. Maybe there is some equanimity. The sense of well-being can be good enough that if you suddenly get a phone call that's a bit difficult, you are in a state of mind where it's easier to take it in calmly because there is a calm equanimous state.

Begin recognizing the seven factors in ordinary life when they come up. Appreciate them and make room for them – don't overlook them, dismiss them, or think they are unimportant. They are very important for this practice. Allow them and avail yourself of them more often. Get familiar with them. When they're there, appreciate them. Riding a bicycle, going for a hike, or reading a great novel can bring up some of these qualities.

The wonderful alchemy of mindfulness practice is that mindfulness of the hindrances – mindfulness of attachment – decreases the attachments. Mindfulness of what's wholesome increases what's wholesome. So it's a wonderful balance. Mindfulness of what's unwholesome or unhelpful in our psychological states

gives us a little freedom and distance from the unwholesome. That freedom and distance take away some of the juice and investment we had put into the unwholesome. When we bring open awareness and clarity to see the Seven Factors of Awakening, they thrive in receptivity, openness, relaxation, and non-entanglement, and they grow. It is wonderful that it works this way.

May you become familiar with the Seven Factors of Awakening. May they be part of your life. May you enjoy them. In June 2020, I did a series of talks on the Seven Factors of Awakening, so you could listen to those talks. It is good to learn about. In terms of the path to liberation, the Seven Factors of Awakening set the stage for liberation itself. That is why they are the limbs of awakening.

The topic for tomorrow will be the last exercise in the fourth foundation of mindfulness. In this, the Seven Factors of Awakening are a platform on which to realize liberation.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to tomorrow.