

# Mindfulness of Breathing (43) Mindfulness Factor of Awakening

March 1, 2021

## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

mindfulness, Seven Factors of Awakening, *sati*, aware, equanimity, *samādhī*, awareness, lucid, mind, state of mind, cognition, recognition, monarch, jewels, clothes, speed of mindfulness, speed of awareness, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Descartes

## **Gil Fronsdal**

Good morning, and welcome to a new theme for these morning teachings. The theme is the Seven Factors of Awakening. This follows the practice and teaching of “experiencing the mind” – experiencing the mind state. The mind state or the mind is a broader experience of our interiority – our inner life – than noticing the particular activities of the mind, such as thinking or emotions.

The state of mind is like the mood or atmosphere – the general state of the way we are – our state of being almost. As we experience our state of mind more fully, we start becoming aware that we can experience

different states of mind – different qualities, characteristics, and features of our state of mind.

The Seven Factors of Awakening can be seen as particular practices we do, and as qualities or characteristics of our state of mind or our state of awareness. As the state of awareness, our state of mind becomes more highlighted and noticed – something we can rest in and feel. Then, we start noticing these qualities of awareness – our state of mind, our state of awareness.

There are seven factors. The first is usually translated as “mindfulness” and the second as “investigation.” Then there is effort, joy, tranquility, *samādhī* (usually translated as “concentration”), and equanimity. These are considered the crown jewels of Buddhism.

In ancient India, a monarch had seven jewels that represented the monarchy. In Buddhism, those seven jewels are the Seven Factors of Awakening. A curious metaphor, found in the ancient texts, is that a monarch has seven special sets of clothes or suits to wear on different occasions. In the same way that a monarch has special – maybe opulent – suits of clothes to wear, Buddhist practitioners, as they develop in practice, have the Seven Factors of Awakening as their suit.

It is kind of a strange metaphor. I think it suggests that a suit is a set of clothes you wear for a while. However, instead of clothes, you wear a factor of awakening for a while. At different times, different factors represent the state of mind you are in. You wear that state for a while.

There can be a time when mindfulness involves a great sense of clear awareness. A clear sense of awareness stands out, and that is the primary characteristic of our state of mind. At other times, a great sense of tranquility, joy, unification (*samādhi*), or equanimity might stand out. Each of the Seven Factors of Awakening can stand out and be the primary characteristic. Or it is possible to be aware of all seven factors in balance and working together. We can recognize them together and see how we need to bring them into balance.

Many years ago, when I sat a long retreat, the Seven Factors of Awakening stood out in highlight at some point in the practice. This can happen when the mind is really settled and at peace. With mindfulness, these factors become the primary characteristics of what we notice because everything else is abated – quiet, still, and peaceful. The seven factors are what remain.

I was instructed to bring the factors into balance. At some point, the teacher said, “I notice when you talk about bringing the Seven Factors of Awakening into

balance, you *never* talk about equanimity. It seems like you're always tinkering with them."

I realized, "Yes, I was always thinking I had to fix them and get them just right. I had no equanimity around whatever state I was in." That helped me settle back and become more equanimous.

The ancient Pali word for the first of the Seven Factors of Awakening is *sati*. It can be translated in many different ways, but the most common English translation is "mindfulness." Due to the way that mindfulness practices came to the West, many things are called mindfulness – perhaps all of them appropriately so.

Sometimes mindfulness is referred to as clear recognition of what is happening. It is a cognitive act, such as recognizing hearing my voice right now. Or it is recognizing there is pressure on your butt if you're sitting on a chair. Or there is the recognition that, "My hand is cold, but my torso is warm."

This clear recognition of things is sometimes fostered by using mental notes. The recognition becomes more highlighted and focused through mental noting.

Sometimes what is called mindfulness is feeling – experiencing and sensing experiences. Some teachers

emphasize the language of feeling: “Feel your breathing. Sense your breathing. Experience what’s going on.” It is more sensory. We are resting in the sensory capacity of the body to be mindful, to be aware.

Sometimes what is emphasized is the power of observation – simply observing what’s happening, but not interfering with it.

These three activities – recognition, feeling, and observation – are emphasized by the Buddha as practices we can do. They are not necessarily what he calls *sati* or mindfulness. He has other words for these activities.

These activities are part of mindfulness practice because they are the practices that lead to *sati* – a state of awareness. What we are looking for as we practice these things – clearly recognizing what’s happening, focusing on the breathing, feeling the experience more fully, observing the experience as it is happening – is what we are moving towards – a state of awareness.

When it becomes a state, Bhikkhu Bodhi sometimes uses the translation “lucid awareness” – where there is a sense of lucidity, clarity, openness, and luminosity. There are many metaphors to describe the state of mindfulness.

It is not easy to be there – to rest in or be with that state of lucid awareness. That’s why, in the process of *ānāpānasati*, as our practice deepens with time, and when we get a sense of the state of mind – we can become aware of a state of awareness that is almost coterminous with the state of mind. It is almost the same thing, or occurs within the same domain.

*Sati* – mindfulness – is a state that we allow for. I think that the word “awareness” is my preferred way of translating *sati*. We are aware. We say, “I am aware.” To paraphrase Descartes, “I am aware, therefore I am.” The phrase “I am” implies an identity: “This defines me.” “I am aware” suggests a broad way of being or existing – existing in awareness.

It is not easy to rest in or to be with mindfulness – but it is possible. One way is to begin living at the speed of mindfulness. This is particularly valuable to do while on a retreat when nothing really has to be done, and there is no hurry to do anything. There’s more time to take it easy and do things at a slower pace than usual.

To practice at the speed of mindfulness, the speed of awareness, is to do whatever you are doing at a speed that keeps you closely aware of being aware. You are cognizant of yourself being aware as you are aware. Be

aware in whatever way awareness is for you at a particular time – through the recognition of what you're doing as you're doing it, by sensing and feeling it as you do it, or simply observing it quietly in the back of your mind.

When practicing at the speed of mindfulness (the speed of awareness), you stay close, so you know you're doing whatever you are doing. You know you're a part of it. You are allowing something to register in the present moment around the experience. This is opposed to doing things so quickly that you're ahead of yourself.

It doesn't necessarily mean you have to do things slowly. I was a short-order cook after I came back from three years in a Zen monastery. I learned to be very aware – doing many things at once in the kitchen – spinning around, working fast. In some ways, I found it easier to be aware there because I could let go of all my distractions, and just be in the dance of the kitchen.

It doesn't necessarily have to be fast or slow. But generally – especially for most people on retreat – moving more slowly can be an initial access point for mindfulness to develop.

Mindfulness, the first factor of awakening, is sometimes seen as a particular activity of mind, a practice we do,

and sometimes as a state of mind. Hopefully, the activity of doing it – the practice – leads to lucidity of awareness, the state of being mindful and aware. And hopefully, you will feel the goodness, freedom, and benefits of doing that.

So, thank you. We'll continue these morning talks on the factors of awakening tomorrow.