

Mindfulness of Breathing (49) Equanimity Factor of Awakening (part 1)

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The topic is the equanimity factor of awakening, the seventh of the Seven Factors of Awakening. Over the last week, I talked about the earlier factors. We are talking about the Seven Factors of Awakening in the context of the practice of *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing, where we are mindful of the mind. We experience the mind as we breathe in, and experience the mind as we breathe out. We have taken our time to understand some of the things we can start experiencing when we experience the mind.

Citta, the Pali word for “mind,” is often translated as “mind state.” The mind is not a physical thing, like the brain. It is the way we experience our interior life – our

mental life – as a whole. It is the whole of the mind, rather than the particular details of different activities of the mind that go on – the thoughts, feelings, impulses, intentions.

How we experience the whole of the mind is personal and contextual. It depends on different factors of the mind that come together. It sounds a bit strange, but how we experience the state of the mind depends on the state of the mind. How we experience the shape or totality of the mind is based on the state of the mind or which mental factors are strongest.

But, as we open to the mind, we can see that it has different characteristics, which we can feel. It takes a lot of stability and being really settled in the practice to start feeling the whole mind and the mood of the mind that might be there.

As our practice becomes stronger, there are seven factors, qualities, or characteristics that become predominant in the state of mind we can experience. Different factors may predominate at different times, and sometimes all of them arise together. The Seven Factors of Awakening are: mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, tranquility, *samādhi*, and equanimity. They each have different functions and work in different ways.

As a state of mind, mindfulness creates real stability. I could say it differently: the mind does not waver, get agitated, or jump around when mindfulness or awareness becomes more of a state that is present – rather than something we have to keep renewing by making the effort from having the intention to be mindful. There is unwavering attention.

Investigation is the ability to look up and see clearly what we intimately experience. Not by analyzing or probing, but more like tuning into a radio frequency and not having any more static. Really feeling and sensing more fully what is going on. This function is really important for the process of liberation. They say investigation is the most important of the seven factors for liberation because this is where we really get things into focus.

The effort factor, which sees the difference between the wholesome and the unwholesome, is also really key in not being trapped by the unwholesome. It finds a certain healthy escape or stepping away into the wholesome.

Joy provides deep satisfaction and contentment, bodily and mentally. It really feels good.

The last three factors – tranquility, *samādhi*, and equanimity – are particularly useful, along with the joy factor. These are all feelings of pleasure and well-being

– positive feelings we can have that are a tremendous support for the practice. They help free us from some of our addictive patterns and attachments to pleasure.

If we are searching for happiness by having more money, status, relationships, or something that is outside of ourselves, that drive can be addictive at times. Or the strong ways that fear, anxiety, or phobias operate inside of us, which can compel us to act in certain ways.

Being settled in these positive factors – states of mind of joy, tranquility, *samādhī*, and equanimity – is really nourishing. They feel so wholesome as a source of well-being that this creates a reconditioning factor. They condition us in new ways. Rather than being conditioned by fear, a feeling of lack, being deprived, or feeling unsafe – all kinds of ways that life has conditioned us to be – we start to recondition ourselves. Then it becomes easier to begin letting go of some of the dysfunctional ways we might be living.

Relying only on mindfulness – seeing clearly and recognizing what is happening – to free us from some of our conditioning is very hard to do. But, by having mindfulness support the process of settling, stability, and growth in the Dharma – we *eventually* begin to be nourished by these wholesome qualities and ways of

being. Eventually is an important word here, so that we don't get impatient.

The last factor is equanimity. Many people, who aren't familiar with this idea in Buddhism, think that equanimity may be aloof, dry, or not really relevant for having a good time in life. Or that it may even be irrelevant for making yourself safe in the world. If we are equanimous, then how do we make ourselves safe?

Before I became a Buddhist practitioner, I don't think I used the word equanimity in any way in my vocabulary. I probably knew what it meant, but it had no relevance for how I lived my life, how I talked, or how I thought about myself. But certainly, with practice and meditation, equanimity has become more and more important for me. It is something I recognize and appreciate as a state – as a feeling that courses through my whole body, with the stability, clarity, openness, and freedom that come with equanimity.

Equanimity is considered one of the most sublime states of being that a person can experience. It is considered the crown jewel of the Seven Factors of Awakening, which themselves are the crown jewels. If your practice develops over time, you may start feeling how special the equanimity factor is – and its rich emotional aspect. It is not indifferent, aloof, or dry.

The equanimity factor – the word belongs to a family of concepts and states that are championed in Buddhism. One of them is equanimity, which is *upekkhā* in Pali. Another one is a mouthful of words. Its etymology means literally something like: “standing in the middle of it all.” It is often seen as a sense of balance.

Then there is the word *sammā*, which may be cognitively related to our word “same.” Pali and English are distant relatives of each other. I’m not sure how these languages connect. *Sammā* can mean something like “even,” “balanced,” as in “evenness of mind.” It can also mean “like,” as in “the same.”

Sammā is related to the word *samena*, which means either “impartially” or “with justice.” Impartial justice or judging things impartially is considered a high ideal. To treat people with impartiality does not mean indifference. It means that we treat everyone equally. And *sammā* is “equal,” “same,” or “sameness” – evenness of mind, impartiality of mind, a balance of heart and mind, of body and mind – and equanimity.

For now, I will say a little bit about equanimity and then pick up the topic tomorrow because it’s so important. The etymology of *upekkhā*, the Pali word for equanimity, is actually quite useful here. *Upekkhā* literally means to have an overview, a bird’s-eye view of what is

happening. It involves the wisdom that comes from seeing how things are.

Equanimity is a wisdom factor. It is not just something that arises because the quality of some inner balance is strong. Rather, it also comes from the strength of mindfulness, investigation, and the other factors when we are able to not be pushed or pulled for or against things. Not quickly becoming partial or reactive to our experience, but having the stability that allows us to have an overview.

When wisdom operates, it can see that, “Oh, that’s being pulled into things; I don’t need to do that.” “That is my anger; I don’t have to pick it up and get involved.” “That is pain. I know about pain. I’ve meditated with pain for a long time. I know I am better off not getting pulled into its orbit and being preoccupied with or reactive to it.”

There is wisdom operating with this overview – having the big picture of how it works. It belongs to the aspect of mindfulness where we can begin observing what is going on. It’s a bit like stepping back and having the big picture – or being up on a hilltop, perhaps looking down.

I had a wonderful experience as a second-year student in college, which was very valuable for me. It was the first time I was living with college roommates in a little

apartment. The apartment had a deck off the living room. One day I was out on the deck with the sliding door closed. Two of my roommates were having a friendly, animated conversation in the living room. I couldn't hear anything that they were saying, but I could see how animated they were. I could feel how I was delighted seeing them. I could also feel how I wasn't being pulled around by what they were saying and how they were. I wasn't getting pulled in or reactive to it. I was just sitting peacefully, delightfully, just watching – a kind of equanimity.

This ability to observe, watch, and perhaps be delighted, or compassionate. Maybe having a response that is situation-appropriate because of our ability to have the overview and clear-seeing of what is going on. The equanimity factor of awakening.

So there will be one more talk on this topic tomorrow. Then we will pick up the pace on the sixteen steps of *ānāpānasati*. Thank you all very much, and I look forward to being together again tomorrow.