

Seven Factors of Awakening: Joy

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Gil Fronsdal

This is the fourth talk on the Seven Factors of Awakening. In the teachings of the Buddha, the Seven Factors of Awakening are paired as opposites with the five hindrances. In between those two are the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are how we go from being caught up in the five hindrances to experiencing the Seven Factors of Awakening, through the practice of mindfulness. The word in Pali for the five hindrances is “*nivarana*.” *Nivarana* literally means “a covering,” so rather than hindering something, the

hindrances cover up something. They cover up our capacity for wisdom. They cover up our capacity for concentration and settledness, and for appreciating the world in a deep way.

As mindfulness develops, it begins to remove that covering. As the coverings get taken off, this is like taking the covers off a light bulb. If the light bulb is on but there's a heavy blanket over it, it doesn't light up the room. But as we take off the cover, the light shines. The Seven Factors of Awakening are what shine forth as the covering of preoccupation is removed. The five hindrances are the ways the mind gets so preoccupied with things that this shuts out our clear awareness of the present moment. Distraction can be so strong that it distracts us from the fact that we're distracted.

As we develop mindfulness, the first thing that happens is we know we're distracted. That's a huge positive step. Rather than feeling discouraged when we finally know we are distracted, know that uncovering the fact that we're distracted is actually on the path to waking up.

The fourth factor of awakening is joy. There are two qualities of joy that arise in practice. One is the joy that gets released in the body as we keep opening, relaxing, softening, and being present. The ancient language of Pali calls it a “suffusion.” It is understood to be a joy that is refreshing and has a deeply satisfying feeling. We

can actually feel this joy welling up in the body and suffusing us.

The other quality of joy has to do with a certain kind of delight, contentment, and happiness that comes with how we're aware, as we show up and meet experience. We are really here for experience. This second kind of joy is particularly important because often we don't feel joy in life and in our body. There is pain and suffering in us and in the world around us.

But there is a rightness to showing up for that, really being present for it, and experiencing it clearly and cleanly.

Perhaps the word “joy” should not be applied to how we feel in situations of great suffering or difficulty in the world or with friends and family. Maybe you'll have to find your own words for this rather than using my words, but there is a feeling of rightness about being here – “Yes, I'm here for this.” If it's happening, it feels right to be here.

A very clean feeling of letting experience come and course through us can happen if we don't close down, react, or contract to suffering. It's more like we keep opening to the suffering respectfully and wisely. In that opening and allowing, there is a feeling of rightness, of goodness, and, I might say, even a kind of joy or

satisfaction in feeling that openness, even with things that are difficult.

The capacity for both these kinds of joy comes into play as we keep practicing. First, we have to be here. Mindfulness practice is about learning how to really embody the present moment, and really inhabit the present moment with awareness – with all the attentional faculties we have. We do this not so much by working, although we certainly develop the capacity, interest, and motivation to be present. But we also learn to relax into the present and settle in here.

For me personally, I find it very significant that the lived experience is only here for this moment. If we are lost in the past and the future, we have lost touch with the only thing that really exists in the world of experience – the lived experience of the moment. We learn to trust that and inhabit that, so we don't miss the opportunity of being alive – the opportunity of experiencing ourselves as conscious beings in the present moment – *here*.

In order to see and recognize experience more clearly, we can have curiosity and interest: what *is* here? As we recognize what's happening more clearly, we make distinctions. We see things in their particularity and in detail.

We ask, “What?” and we see. What we see is that there are distinctions and differences between things. We see

that we can start choosing both the “this” and the “how” – *this* is where I want to be. *This* is where attention is. This is *how* I am going to pay attention.

We have the ability to choose and to recognize that there's a way of being, a way of attending, and things to attend to that our system wants to pay attention to and connect to. There is a way that feels right to be present for experience. It has a rightness to it. This is not so much a matter of working or doing something new. It is about

seeing clearly what's going on, recognizing where the path is, recognizing where the rightness is, and recognizing: *this* is the place to be. This *way* of being with the breath.

When all those things begin to kind of settle in to some degree, the word that I associate with the joy factor of awakening is the word “yes.” It is saying “yes” to the experience. “This” is about being with experience. “Yes” means we open to this. “Yes”, this is it. In fact, it is possible to have that “yes” with pain.

Pain by itself is a drag, in a way. But there is also the way we meet pain: “Yes, I'll open to it. Yes, I'll be here with this. Yes, I'll be here with this person. Yes, I'll be here with the food that I eat. Yes, I'm going to really be here for the experience of washing dishes or cleaning the kitchen floor. Yes, I'm now here being with the

breathing in meditation. Yes.” We are meeting and connecting and saying yes.

For me, that “yes” carries some idea of joy, delight, and appreciation, connected to opening to and giving myself to that experience more fully. When the joy factor begins to arise, some of it has to do with being able to give ourselves over fully and completely to the experience of the moment. Some people have the experience of reading a wonderful book, and for them, it is the joy of being absorbed in reading the book. Or we can be absorbed in some hobby, craft, or work we're doing.

But actually, joy arises from the unification, the harmony, the non-distractedness, and the non-fragmentation (the mind jumping around doing many different things) of just being fully present for one thing. There's something about the harmony of doing that. Physiologically, psychologically, maybe even biochemically, and neurologically, things come together and work together smoothly. All the kinks or the rough surfaces have been smoothed out, and we can glide smoothly and kind of flow with experience.

When the joy and delight of really being here become strong, it feels like I have sometimes felt when I was body surfing and I've caught the wave, and I'm carried by the wave in a wonderful way. In the same way, we

can be caught by the breath and by the present moment and surf along. It is an exhilarating feeling.

We don't make ourselves feel that, but we give ourselves over to one thing. This is the ability to be collected on one thing – one breath, one experience, one present moment, here for this, just this present moment. Not present moments in other places, not present moments in other times, but this place, this time, and we say, “Yes,” fully to this.

Doing this is a process. It certainly takes time. I didn't experience this kind of meditative joy for a long time. Getting there was a process – of being *here* over and over again, having the clarity of seeing that comes with the “what?”, and being able to know the *this* that we pay attention to, *this* that's important right now. Not the *this* of fantasy, not the this of criticism and preoccupation, but the *this* of the body, the *this* of breathing, the *this* of an awareness that is with the present moment, the *this* of an awareness that is not in conflict with what is, but is open to what is.

We give ourselves fully to something with the word “yes.” Yes – this is what we're doing. This is where we are. Yes, with this kind of attention. Yes, to a kind of silence that is luminous, a silence that is clear, a

stillness that allows us to be fully here for this experience.

To the degree to which we are able to put aside our preoccupations and concerns when we sit to meditate, when we start settling into this deeper capacity for well-being, I hope that, as we come out of meditation and go into our world, we translate that well-being and apply it to the world around us, so that we have a clear sense that our meditation practice is not just for ourselves, but it's also for the welfare and happiness of all beings. May our joy be contagious. Thank you.