

Seven Factors of Awakening – Mindfulness

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Today is the first day of a series of talks on the Seven Factors of Awakening. The plan is to teach them for seven days in a row, including Saturday and Sunday, for those of you who like to do the whole series. To introduce the Seven Factors of Awakening, Buddhism is less a teaching than instructions. It is instructions for how to wake up. These seven factors of waking up are our inner capacities that mature and grow in this process of becoming awake.

The word “awake” is often a translation of “*Bodhi*.” Buddhism comes from *Bodhi* (*Bodhi-ism*, or Buddhism) – awake-ism, the “ism” of being awake. But the word “*Bodhi*” also means wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Sometimes the word “awake,” as it’s used in awakening in Buddhism, doesn’t have any clear meaning. It is not rooted in something solid or substantial. The word “*Bodhi*,” meaning knowledge, understanding, or wisdom, gives us more of the feeling that we’re connected, and involved, and seeing the world in a clear way.

The Seven Factors of Awakening are not only the goal of Buddhism – to become free and liberated – but I also see them as a wonderful framework for exploring how to enter into the world with a capacity to live in the world in a healthy, balanced, supportive way. We bring our best qualities with us into our attention to the world, our witnessing of the world. Perhaps we could call them “the seven factors of witnessing.”

If we really want to see what’s happening in our society, we might want to consider *how* we see it. It’s very easy to get caught up in our opinions, our thoughts, our reactivity, our fears, our anger, and our distress, so we lose touch with the capacity to see and experience deeply in ourselves. We are changed by this deeper seeing. We touch into the depths of our capacity to care, and the depth of our capacity to engage in ways that are free, and not caught by hate, greed, or fear.

As I go through the seven factors this week, I’m hoping that we can consider how they might come into play when we read or watch the news, or when we encounter in our neighborhood some of the challenges that exist. As we reflect on our relationship to this world that we live in, I hope that we can reflect more deeply and more fully from this place of freedom that the seven factors of awakening point us to.

I think of the Seven Factors of Awakening as like the sap in the tree of Buddhism. The Ficus tree that the Buddha sat under is called “the Bodhi tree.” The idea is that the tree represents Buddhism, and the nourishment for it – what keeps it alive, its sap – are these seven beautiful qualities inside us that can awaken in practice.

They are mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Around the edges of these are other important qualities of mind and heart, but these seven are the core qualities that the Buddha emphasized.

He sometimes gave a very simple overview of the path of practice from beginning to end. First, a person would let go of the five hindrances. Then they would cultivate the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Next, they would develop the Seven Factors of Awakening.

As the five hindrances decrease, the space that’s created in the mind is filled in by the Seven Factors of Awakening. When forces of greed, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and regret, and doubt decrease, that

space is available in the mind and heart for mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

The first factor of awakening is mindfulness. This does not mean just being mindful – it means being really settled into mindfulness so it begins to flower, and awareness begins to have a life of its own. When mindfulness is really strong, it's hard not to be mindful. It is as if this is what is coursing through us. This is what's most alive. The life force of awareness is what has space. Everything else has been cleared away. It is a fantastic feeling to be really established in mindfulness.

The way *sati* is talked about is that it's not just mindfulness we're cultivating, but it's also awareness centered on four subjective areas of our life. These subjective areas of our life are not meant to be an exclusion of the world around us. Rather, we are meant to tend to the way that we are subjectively, so that we can be in harmony with and attuned to the external world in a good way. It is important that the inner and the outer worlds are attuned to each other.

The idea is to start here, in our subjective experience. There are four areas. There's the area of our physicality. We attune to and become aware of our subjective experience of being in a body. Next, there is the subjective experience of the feeling tones – the hedonic tones of pleasantness and unpleasantness. Then there is the subjective experience of states of mind – how our mind is. Last, there are the subjective experiences of the inner processes that come into play that either keep us contracted and caught or allow us to open up and be free.

The Buddha called these subjective experiences “the ancestral homeland.” They are the place of refuge. We have a refuge inside. Being with each subjective experience in a certain way, being connected here, is a place of safety, a place of deep home. What is it to really rest or be at home in oneself? It's an experience that not many people have.

People have tremendous challenges in this life that sometimes make it very hard to feel that we can rest, or trust, or settle into our direct experience here and really feel it. Part of the process of practice, sometimes for years, is this noble and wonderful path of awakening the deepest capacities we have to be aware.

My favorite translation for *sati* is not “mindfulness,” but rather, “awareness.” But what *sati* or awareness is, we probably don't want to specify too precisely, because it's probably some combination of all the different attentional faculties we have. It is the miracle of attention, the miracle of how our psychophysical bodies can have the capacity to register, perceive, and take in a tremendous amount of information through the vehicle of attention, or what we call “awareness.”

In our mind, we have the ability to know. We can know what's happening, we can recognize something. We can recognize that we're breathing; we can recognize that this is an inhale, and this is an exhale. We have the ability to feel, to sense the experience of breathing. We can sense and feel the pressure and the release of pressure, the movements of the body as we breathe. As we breathe in, we might feel the expansion of the ribcage, and as we exhale, the collapse of it. The ability to sense physically, almost like we're getting a massage, is another attentional faculty we have.

We can be aware of the feeling tone of the experience. We have nerve endings that allow us to feel pleasure and pain. Feeling what's pleasant and unpleasant in the experience is a very important part of the human experience. Doing that allows us to make adjustments sometimes, and to appreciate what is pleasant, nourishing, and supportive. It is possible to sense what's pleasant in the breathing and what is maybe not so pleasant and uncomfortable. We can learn how to be attuned to, aligned with, and aware of these pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones in a supportive way so that our willingness to be here and present for it all is strengthened.

It is also possible to just settle back and observe the experience. *Vipassanā* means “to see clearly.” The idea of seeing is a metaphor that the Buddha used a lot. It is very prominent in Buddhism. The idea is that with the inner eye, we're kind of settling back. The image that is actually used sometimes in the *suttas* is that of leaning against a tree with a pasture in front of us, and just allowing the mind to gaze and be aware. For me, it's like leaning against a tree and watching a river go by. There is a sense of ease and relaxation as we settle into ourselves. We just watch the phenomena flow in a nice, comfortable, easeful way, much as we would watch a river go by.

This capacity to observe is also part of mindfulness. In fact, traditionally, the capacity to observe is considered a very advanced form of mindfulness practice. I'm saying that we have a lot of different attentional faculties. Another one that the Buddha didn't talk about is proprioception. We have an awareness of where our body is in space and where different bodies are in relationship to each other in space.

When we say the word “here,” what I'm pointing to is the capacity to settle back, open up, and allow all the doors of perception, all the ways we have to be aware, to be open. This doesn't mean to go out to experience or try to make something happen, but all the windows are open, and we see what breezes come into the house, and what smells from the garden come into the house. When we sit *here* and open, for me, saying: “here” is kind of like a movement of both opening and settling. When I open my hand to *here*, then the sensitive part of the palm is available to feel and sense what's here, which it can't feel when it's closed up.

Mindfulness is the natural capacity for attention. We give it a chance to operate, a chance to be here. The single word that I like to use to represent the practice of mindfulness is the word “here.”

As you go through your day, you might say that word – not the way that you usually command a dog to come here, but rather, almost like a lover, almost like a gift – “here.” Here I am is a gift. Then experience what is here. If you're reading or watching the news, is there some way of watching deeply and fully, and feeling all the difficult, challenging, strong emotions that might come? Is there some advantage or benefit to waking up to “here” in the middle of that? Does waking up here in this way give more space, and allow strong emotions to be there somewhat independently of the reactivity, the rush to judgment, the rush to contract or give up?

Each day I'll give you a different word for the Seven Factors of Awakening – a little practice word that can hopefully open this experience for you as you go through your day. The Seven Factors of Awakening are in you. They're part of you, they're in you. May this practice awaken these wonderful qualities in you, so that you can be a benefit to this world. Thank you.