

The Seven Factors of Awakening: Investigation

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The theme for this week is the Seven Factors of Awakening. The second factor of awakening is usually called “investigation.” This is what I was taught by teachers in Asia and Burma and by teachers here in the West. I think investigation is a wonderful quality to bring to mindfulness.

The *vipassanā* word that I like that encapsulates this quality of investigation is the word “what”. Just “what.” What is this? What? When we ask, “What is this?” we don’t answer the question with words, with cognitive understanding, but rather, with a movement of opening, of more receptivity and more attentiveness in order to register things more fully. We answer as if the “what” is answered by reality, not by our thinking mind. It’s just a “what.” This way we are more available.

“Investigation” is how the Pali word is often translated. This week, given what is going on in our society, I want to take us to the literal meaning of the word, which is probably closer to what the Buddha meant. The Pali word is *dhmma-vicaya*. *Vicaya* means “to differentiate, to distinguish.” Some people will translate it as “discriminate,” and I would do that except that we have such strong associations of that word with “bias.”

Vicaya means “to differentiate, to distinguish *dhmmas* (dharmas.) Dharmas can mean anything at all – the particularity of anything, each detail of things is a dharma. But it also means mental qualities – the quality of the different functions of the mind, and of what is happening in the mind. The important aspect I want to emphasize is differentiation.

Mindfulness is a foundation. It’s the beginning, not the end of practice. To really be able to rest in mindfulness and be very attentive is very satisfying and meaningful. But the clearer the mindfulness becomes, the more clearly awareness is established in the present moment, and the more we begin seeing clearly, the more we start seeing each thing in and of itself. We see the distinctions between things.

Rather than going out on the sidewalk and just seeing we are on the street, we see the cracks in the sidewalk, the little grass that’s growing up in the gaps between the cracks of the sidewalk. We see the details of what is happening. We start to see in greater and greater detail. Things become highlighted. It is as if we see our experience in greater and greater resolution.

Dhmma-Vicaya doesn’t mean active investigation, thinking, and probing so much. Rather, it is about starting to distinguish and differentiate the particularities of what’s happening, instead of seeing the generalized ideas we have about what’s happening.

For example, when I am sitting, maybe my breathing is uncomfortable and my mind keeps wandering off. I might make a generalization that, “Oh, this is a bad day to meditate. I shouldn’t have sat down to meditate.” This generalization is very far removed from really taking in the details of the moment and being settled and aware enough to see and differentiate that the breathing is just uncomfortable. I’ve eaten too much. My belly is distended and it feels uncomfortable to exhale into that kind of belly.

Or I’m thinking about something and my mind keeps going a little bit off (for me) into the right hemisphere, the right side, as I think about something that’s happening at home. As I sit here the direction of home for me is to

the right. I'm starting to see the details of it all. And the details are not a judgment. Details are just seeing things clearly for what they are. Then I could kind of open and rest in the distended belly and just feel that it's uncomfortable, but I don't have to make it a problem. I just see "distended belly."

This movement towards differentiation allows us to do something very powerful: we begin to be able to make a distinction, see clearly, and differentiate between different qualities of attention – the different qualities of mind that are engaged when we're doing anything. This is really at the heart of the onward leading nature of the Dharma.

As we're able to settle in mindfulness and see experience more and more clearly and really be – seeing and settling, and seeing and settling further – at some point we start seeing the *dharmas* of the mind – the different mental qualities.

We start to differentiate between the things we do in our mind that are skillful and things we do that are unskillful. To put it in very experiential terms so it's not too abstract, we start feeling, seeing, and sensing the qualities of what the mind is doing that have a sense of "ouch," and those qualities of the mind that have an "ahh, that's nice. That's good." We start differentiating between what has qualities of stress or ease, pleasantness versus unpleasantness, bringing dis-ease.

We begin to become more sensitive to this and start seeing deeper and deeper into how the mind functions. Then we can do that with mindfulness, with meditation itself. At some point, for example, we might notice that we are actually leaning forward. We are trying in such a way that the mindfulness is contracted and tight. We see that the contraction and tightness feel unskillful. There's an "ouch" in it. There's a little unpleasantness in that. Perhaps just by knowing that, something releases and relaxes. We realize we don't need to be leaning forward and straining to try to be mindful, and we can make an adjustment to not be tight and contracted in mindfulness. Instead, we ask if we can be relaxed and mindful.

The ability to differentiate what's happening in the mind or in the heart gives us tremendous wisdom. We can start to see that if we're really centered in ourselves, taking in the information that's here, differentiating what's going on, and staying present, as we say something that is mean-spirited, we can feel the "ouch" in us as we say it. And as we say something that's kind, we can feel, "Ah, that's nice." If the kindness is somehow off – if it is more like pity or something, if we are really centered, it is possible to feel that – "Oh, what I think is kindness is a little bit off. It feels uncomfortable. I feel tight; I feel constricted. There's a lot of self involved in this. This self thing itself has tightness and constriction."

If we feel that we're about to be mean to someone, it certainly feels uncomfortable. But when we really start differentiating, we might see that underneath that meanness we feel afraid and we're trying to protect ourselves. We might decide, "Well, that's interesting. Maybe I can find out how to protect myself without being mean. I could find a different way."

The idea is that we have a tremendous amount of information available to us in terms of the quality of our hearts and minds as we engage in the world. Investigation isn't so much a matter of probing and analyzing, but rather, mindfulness helps us to become more and more sensitive.

The path to this kind of investigation is a path of relaxed awareness, settling in, and *abiding* in awareness. One of the most frequent ways the Buddha talks about mindfulness is not as something we do, but something we establish, something we enter into, and something we abide in. All these kinds of verbs don't suggest actively doing something, but rather, something we can enter, something that we establish, abide in, or rest in.

As we rest in mindfulness, abiding and learning how to be centered, the capacity to differentiate becomes stronger and stronger. This is a treasure. The Seven Factors of Awakening are considered the crown jewels of Buddhism.

As we differentiate and see the details more, we start becoming our own teachers. We start seeing the Dharma in ourselves. The differentiation of the dharmas means to see the teachings in our own moment-to-moment experience. It is not very complicated. It's as simple as the "ouch" and the "ah." We see the feeling of stress or de-stressing, the ease or unease that are there, in subtler and subtler ways.

Learning how to be with that experience of differentiation, seeing clearly what's going on inside of us, opens up two paths, maybe very broad paths. One goes towards greater freedom. The other leads to greater loss of

freedom and caught-ness, even bondage (in the ancient language). We feel, sense, and smell the movement toward freedom through this capacity to differentiate our experience and see the particularity of it.

This movement toward freedom is one reason that we are trying to shift in mindfulness practice into an attentional mode of almost silent awareness, as opposed to the mode of thinking our way through life, where everything is processed through the filter of our thoughts, ideas, stories, and commentaries. If we can step back from that and find a deeper foundation that's aware of experience and keep resting in it, opening, and coming here, what will happen slowly over time is that with the foundation of mindfulness, the differentiation of our experience – seeing the distinctions within it and the particularity of things – begins to become clearer and clearer.

This is where wisdom begins to be born. This is where the path to greater awakening begins happening. And this is where we can participate better in our world. If we know ourselves well enough, we can pick up the subtle ways or big ways in which we're off in our communication with others. We can pick up the cues inside about what is really wishing for the welfare of others, and what is not. In this process, we'll discover that it's for our own benefit to live for the welfare of others, and it is harmful to us to be concerned with harming others, putting down others, being critical of others, being prejudiced toward others, or being racist. It's a kind of self-harm. We'll discover this not because we have to analyze it or believe it, but because we get the data, the information from within.

So mindfulness is just the beginning of the path. In terms of the Seven Factors of Awakening, the path continues through the innate natural capacity for heightened sensitivity to the uniqueness and specialness of each detail of experience as it unfolds for us. It is a beautiful thing. Thank you, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.