

Seven Factors of Awakening: Tranquillity and Ease

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Today is the fifth day of these talks on the Seven Factors of Awakening. I'm very aware of what's happening in the world as I talk about these topics. To people who are concerned with the state of affairs in the world, it might seem as if doing meditation and focusing on becoming peaceful and at ease is counterintuitive, at a time when there is so much distress, conflict, and suffering going on all around.

But I think this practice is actually more needed because there are two things: what we do, and how we are as we do it. The specialty of Buddhist meditation practice is to cultivate how we are. We cultivate a “how” that allows us to go into the world in an effective way. This is not any different than when people on the front lines of health care or social justice do self-care – eating and sleeping well in order to better be able to go out there and do the work they're doing.

In the same way, we want to meditate well so that the inner heart, the inner life, is in a good, balanced place in order to be able to engage with the world around us. This is because how we are is a big part of what we spread into the world. If we don't take care of ourselves and we end up acting from our frustration, our anger, our hate, our greed, or even our confusion, that's what spreads outwards. Those of us who are following the news see lots of examples of how this spreads and it's contagious.

But we can come instead from places of non-hate, non-greed, and non-delusion. We can come with peace, kindness, love, and tranquility so that the best parts of us can act for the benefit of the world. This is what we're doing here this week with the Seven Factors of Awakening.

Today we come to the fifth factor, usually called “tranquility.” The actual full meaning of this is “tranquility of the body.” It is the first of the calming factors of the Seven Factors of Awakening – tranquility, concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity. Sometimes it is said that the three calming factors should be in balance with the activating factors of awakening – investigation, effort, and joy, the ones that bring more energy. So sometimes there is kind of a balancing act in practice as we bring them into balance.

But also, as practice deepens, there's a natural quieting of mental activity. The activity of investigation or discernment, the activity of effort, and even the activity of joy begin to quiet down. This has a lot to do with learning to just be mindful of what is and just see. It is as if we give breathing room to and make space for our experience. We are no longer activating or reactivating the mind or continuing to be busy doing. The result is a natural calming.

At some point that calming of the system gets experienced as a very deep physical tranquility – a tranquility of the body. This tranquility can sometimes be experienced as a diffusion of something like ambrosia spreading through the body – almost like a healing medicine of peacefulness, ease, or tranquility. For me, it is as if I've dipped into a very cool, refreshing pool of water on a very hot day, and it feels so good in the body.

For tranquility of the body, this tranquility factor of awakening, I like to use the word “ease” sometimes. I find the word “ease” is broader or encompasses a little bit more than the idea of tranquility. For me, the sense of ease means that I can be easy. I can have ease with how there is unease. And there are times I feel uneasy. When I

sit down to meditate, I can feel uneasy about something. Then I can hold that with ease, not making it a problem, not trying to fix everything, but opening to the uneasiness and allowing it.

We allow the whole system – the dharma system that we are, the inner psychophysical processes – to settle on their own. We don't have to always be so involved with the doing of practice. With all these factors of awakening, momentum is building. Mindfulness gets stronger. The differentiation of states – the differentiation of dharmas of the second factor becomes stronger. The ability to really have a satisfying effort or engagement – we are really here – becomes more established. And there is a sense of “yes” in the goodness and joy of being here. It feels good to finally be rooted in the present moment.

All these factors together are conditions that allow for a very deep letting go, a settling, and a feeling of safety and ease. We feel this is a good place to be. This is the good place to be.

The word for the tranquility factor of awakening is “ease.” We can say the word “ease” periodically. I like these words when they're kind of open-ended and there is no agenda or expectation from them. But rather, it's more as if we say the word and then we make room for a response. I liken this sometimes to dropping a pebble into a pond. The pond allows the ripples of water to go out from the place where the pebble fell in. So we can drop the pebble of these words into our hearts and then make room, allow, and notice how we respond to the words.

Independently of what we think about these words or the meanings we give these words, subconsciously our heart might have its own response to the words. That meaning might have to do with memories from early in life or experiences we've had. Or maybe we've met someone who seems particularly tranquil, calm, and at ease. Just hearing that word might open us to feel the presence of that person.

So just drop in the word “ease.” Even when there's unease, just drop in the word “ease.” Perhaps you'll notice that the struggle with the unease lets up. The unease doesn't let up, but the struggle with it and the reactivity to it can let up and let go.

Joy is considered to be wonderful and it is the fourth factor of awakening. I don't know if this is a paradox but it is noteworthy that Buddhism puts a tremendous amount of importance on being present for suffering – so much so that I think there should be a bumper sticker that says, “I stop for suffering.” This does not mean we should suffer better, but rather, that we can work on and address it, and find a way beyond suffering.

But the process that Buddhism offers – the practice – is, in fact, one that brings a lot of joy, happiness, and well-being. The path to the end of suffering includes happiness. So the fourth factor of awakening is joy. But joy is a little bit more active than happiness. As our system in meditation moves from joy and delight in just being present and becomes calmer and more settled, the tranquility factor is associated strongly with an embodied feeling of well-being and happiness. Tranquility is a very sublime, very contented, very settled feeling of happiness. Because it's so physical, some people call it a kind of pleasure. But for me, the word “pleasure” doesn't represent well the sense of real contentment and well-being that come with this happiness.

The tranquility factor is not just a matter of relaxing the body and the muscles. It is a matter of really allowing the whole system to tap into deeper currents of well-being. The remarkable thing about the factors of awakening is that they are natural faculties within us. They are natural capacities that can be unleashed, recognized, or allowed to germinate, grow, and flower.

Tapping into this well-being is not an engineering task. It's not something you have to do or expect. It has a lot to do with being here – the first factor of awakening: being here and allowing things to show themselves, allowing them to be here. As the five hindrances abate, and as our preoccupations abate, there is more than simply letting go of our clinging. We let go and we make room for the amazing goodness that's here – the amazing beauty that exists in each one of us, the amazing Dharma process that moves towards greater and greater freedom through these wonderful qualities.

We have the words “here,” “what,” “this,” “yes,” and now “ease.” I'm looking forward to the chance to complete the factors of awakening with you. Thank you very much.

