

# Seven Factors of Awakening: Equanimity

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**Gil Fronsdal**

Greetings from Redwood City. This will be the seventh and last talk on the Seven Factors of Awakening. Before I talk about the seventh factor, the factor of equanimity, I would like to share a few more overall thoughts about these factors.

The Buddha made a remarkable statement about these seven factors. He said that the continuity and growth of the Dharma (I think he meant the growth of Buddhism in the world) is not dependent on what people believe. It is dependent on people who cultivate the Seven Factors of Awakening. That is where the growth and development of the Dharma is: in the qualities developed in people.

The Buddha also said – about those who want to be involved with or believe that religion is about an ultimate truth, ultimate reality, or ultimate states of awareness and enlightenment – "If you want to be involved with what's ultimate, be involved with the Seven Factors of Awakening."

Remarkably, the Seven Factors of Awakening are not views, tenets of belief, or doctrines. They're qualities that live inside of us that can be cultivated and developed. As I said on the first day, they are the sap that runs through the tree of Buddhism. The Buddha said that if you have a tree in the forest and there are different species of trees that are overgrowing it, then there's no light for the smaller tree to grow up and become strong. He used that analogy for the hindrances. When the hindrances are overgrowing the Seven Factors of Awakening, they can't grow. There's not enough light there. But if the hindrances are removed, then there is light that allows the tree of the Seven Factors of Awakening to grow and become strong.

The idea is that we're learning about the quality of our inner life, the state of our inner life. We study it and pay attention to it enough that we can learn to put aside and not be involved in the hindrances, which are said to cover over, obscure, and hinder the wisdom and clarity of the mind. By removing the cover of the other trees that want to grow, we uncover the seedlings that are ready to grow and become strong – the Seven Factors of Awakening.

As we practice mindfulness, we look for and begin studying and becoming aware of those things that enhance the hindrances and make them grow and develop, and also what enhances and develops the Seven Factors of Awakening. We begin to understand the conditions that lead to each. The ancient language calls these conditions "the food" for each. Many things can be food, but preoccupation with the hindrances is food for the hindrances to grow. Paying attention to the Seven Factors of Awakening and recognizing them is the primary food for them to grow.

The idea here is that we have these factors in us already. They are not foreign ideas. They are something that all of us have, but some of us have not learned to recognize that they're there. After I have woken up from a nice refreshing nap, and I am lying down, looking at the ceiling, feeling very content and pretty clear, I have done an exercise of going through and noticing the Seven Factors of Awakening that are present in this ordinary kind of waking up clear and content from a nap. You might do the exercise if you have something comparable to that where you're very content and happy, the mind is clear and alert, and you have nothing you need to do. This could be sitting under a tree in a park at a time when everything is taken care of for you. Recognize the factors are already there for you.

Then we want to enhance, develop, and grow them. One of the requirements for that is to not be caught up in our thoughts, our hate, our greed, our desires, or our emotions. We need to be like a big redwood tree that can sway with the wind and not be knocked over, not like a tumbleweed that blows across the desert because it's not rooted.

The seventh factor of awakening is equanimity. Equanimity has two primary aspects. One is stability, a sense of balance. That can even come from physical stability if we have a real sense of being physically stable and strong.

It can sometimes make us much more resilient in the challenges of life. If we're healthy and feel strong, have eaten well and maybe done some exercise, a certain kind of strength and stability can course through us so we are much more resilient in meeting what people say to us or what goes on around us. If we're ill or tired or hungry or agitated in any way, the slightest little thing is just too much, and we get pushed over, and it's hard.

A sense of equanimity can come from being balanced and stable. The example I gave is of physical stability. There can also be stability in our emotional life, stability in the mind and inner life. That comes from practice as we keep doing mindfulness and concentration practices. We develop a sense of stability with calm, a sense of strength in the mindfulness, strength in the concentration, strength in being able to let go, strength in showing up for practice, and the strength of confidence. A lot of strength gets developed slowly over time with practice.

We become much more equanimous, meaning that we're not reactive. We don't get obsessed with or reactive to things. We act and we respond, but we're not on automatic pilot. We're not swirling around, pushed around, triggered easily by everything that goes on around us. There is a stability, so we can gaze upon what's happening before the mind's reactivity takes over.

This is not an easy place to come to. This is the direction of the practice: to come to the place where we can be still and gaze upon everything kindly. The word "gaze" is well-chosen, because in Pali the word "equanimity" (*upekkhā*) has the meaning "to gaze over, to look, have an overview of what's going on."

In terms of our practice, the second meaning of equanimity is the equanimity that comes from having wisdom – having an overview of things, seeing the conditionality of things, being able to see what's happening and see our response to it, our reactivity. It means being able to have a broad or clear view, a gaze where we see what's happening and watch it arise and pass, come and go, without automatically reacting, picking it up, or pushing it away.

Then there can be a greater capacity for wisdom, understanding, kindness, and love to operate. These can't operate when we respond automatically and get triggered and pushed around by things; when we get angry, sad, or upset; when we collapse; when we quickly take things personally; when we use them to define ourselves; when we defend ourselves; when we feel sorry for ourselves – whatever we do that gets in the way of this broad open ability to just see and be, and not be pushed around by things.

Equanimity (*upekkhā*) is like the crown jewel of Buddhism. This is a bit hard to appreciate for people who haven't touched into it. It can sound like indifference, perhaps. But it's almost like a very sublime, rich treasure of an emotional state. It's a whole state of our inner life when that is allowed to flow and is trusted in a very deep way, when we are not tipped over by it, pushed around by it, distracted by anything, or obsessed with anything.

Equanimity is a phenomenally generous state because things are allowed to manifest and be as they are in the gaze of equanimity. The feeling of generosity, the feeling of love, and the willingness to be present that are in equanimity are so much needed in this world, and are such beautiful things for us. To have the equanimity to allow things to unfold, especially in meditation.

One of the very inspiring aspects of this Dharma practice is the way in which the Dharma not only lives in us, but we are also the Dharma, in the sense that the Dharma is the inner process, the inner movement toward health that leads us to freedom and liberation. There's a whole momentum of the natural potential for growth within us. A lot of our practice is about just getting out of the way so that these processes can unfold and lead us to greater peace, greater wisdom, and greater love.

Clearing away the hindrances and recognizing the Seven Factors of Awakening is to begin recognizing the Dharma that's within us. When those seven factors become strong, in a sense we become the Dharma, or the Dharma becomes us – there's no difference.

The word that I would like to offer for equanimity is “okay” (I've offered a word for each of the seven factors). It's okay. There is a way of not condoning anything or agreeing to anything – a kind of, “Okay, that's how it is,” where there is space for things and we can see things before we react. This is a deep, wise sense of “Okay, okay.”

To sum up: mindfulness – to be *here*.

Investigation – to have the question: “*What?* What is this?”

Effort – the word “this” – being present for *this*.

Joy – with the word “yes.”

Tranquility – with the word “ease.”

Concentration – with the word “steady.”

Equanimity – with the wisest possible way of saying, “Okay – it's okay.”

Someone here – Tom – wrote, “cultivation.” I love the word “cultivation” to describe this practice, because for me, “cultivation” is a botanical gardening term. As we cultivate and allow plants to grow, we cultivate ourselves in this practice. May the beautiful trees of equanimity within you grow and flower and be a benefit for all beings. Thank you all.