

Mindfulness of Breathing (72) Independence, Freedom, Ending

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Seven Factors of Awakening, Buddha, awake, awakening, liberation, entering, stream, current, independent, independence, seclusion, fading, dispassion, cessation, stopping, silence, stillness, spaciousness, awareness, clinging, entangled, self-concern, conceit, self-identity, absence, nonreactive, *Ānāpānasati Sutta*

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In over seventy talks and guided meditations, we have gone through a particular discourse of the Buddha: the “Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing” – mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out. At its heart are very simple instructions – almost like Cliff Notes – on mindfulness of breathing.

As the discourse goes on, the Buddha gives more teaching, building on or extending the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing, which also represents the development, growth, and onward leading nature of this practice. As we do this practice, some things get born inside and begin to unfold or express themselves. Among these are the Seven Factors of Awakening.

In the way it is presented in the discourse, it isn’t so much that we practice the Seven Factors of Awakening, but we recognize them. In other texts, the Buddha is quite explicit that the very recognition of some of the awakening factors is the nourishment or food that allows them to keep growing.

An organic growth happens as we start to learn how to give ourselves over and trust the process of being aware of our breathing and of being present – not caught up in our thoughts, distractions, and preoccupations. We learn to be with ourselves in a caring way, and so the Seven Factors of Awakening develop.

They are called awakening factors for two reasons. One reason is that they lay down the foundation or the conditions from which awakening can happen. The word “Buddha” means “the one who is awake.” It comes from the Pali word for “awake.” In a sense, Buddhism can be translated into English as “awake-ism.” It is an “ism” that has to do with liberation, with freedom of mind and heart in such a way that some kind of awareness wakes up.

When a person has a first taste or glimmer of what awakening, liberation, is – so much so that it gets their attention – it is like: “Oh, this is central! This is really what practice is about. This is the center. I want to make this the center of my life. Nothing else is as important, not even the tremendously valuable love and compassion I have for others. Nothing compares to freedom.” Freedom allows for love and compassion to be clean and supportive for everyone, including ourselves.

We have the first taste of what is described in English as “entering the stream.” The language in Pali literally means “entering the current” of the river. If we can stay in the current, it will carry us all the way to liberation. After the first glimmer of awakening, learning to recognize the current, stay in it, and be carried by it becomes part of the practice.

The text of the discourse on the Seven Factors of Awakening ends with a little section that has a lot of ellipses. It is not spelled out all the way. It is very short, and I think it’s easy for people reading the text to skip over it – to not see it. Earlier, it talks about how the Seven Factors of Awakening arise out of the practice of mindfulness.

Then it goes on to talk about how the Seven Factors of Awakening come into play, develop, and keep growing, and supporting us after awakening. They are now based on something. I’m going to give you my adaptation of the Pali words. If the Pali words are translated literally into English, I think they do not mean as much for an English-speaking audience. But the value and fullness of these words – in their best sense – can be closer to what in English would be understood as being based on a sense of independence.

Someone who has entered the stream – entered the current – is said to be “independent in the Dharma.” Now they know what the Dharma is for themselves. They know. They don’t need more books, teachers, or anything. They just know. And they know what the practice is about. So there is independence. They are based in independence. Based on freedom – a sense of real freedom.

We are no longer in bondage or entangled in things. There is a feeling of freedom. There is a sense that for all our suffering, attachments, clinging, and conceits, there is stopping. A phenomenal ending has happened, and henceforth it is always here.

These three qualities – independence, freedom, and ending – are usually translated into English as “seclusion,” as “dispassion” (the fading away of clinging), or as “cessation.” The last two – fading away or dispassion, and cessation – are steps fourteen and fifteen in the “*Ānāpānasati Sutta*.”

These qualities are now available to us. We have experienced a degree of independence, freedom, and stopping – cessation – that is memorable. Now it is ever-present in some way. We are not always aware of it, but it’s right there sitting close by.

In the guided meditation, I talked about silence, stillness, and spaciousness always being here in some fashion. Once we have a really clear and powerful experience of these qualities, there can be a sense that they are ever-present as well. When love is associated with these qualities, some people say: “Yes. Love is always present.” When they are all together – giving a sense of real peace – then peace is always present.

Some quality of that awakening remains available or recognizable, and then it becomes the basis for further practice. Now we know what the practice is about. The idea is that we want to practice in harmony with this. We want to practice in the spirit of independence. We want to practice so that awareness itself has a feeling of being independent of what it knows and what we are aware of. We are not entangled with or caught in our experience.

If we want to recognize where freedom is in awareness – there is no freedom in clinging, wanting more, and expecting. There is no freedom in reacting: “Oh, this is terrible. I’m a bad meditator. This shouldn’t be here. This is embarrassing.”

Of course, there are ways in which we are still not totally free. There are all kinds of things that arise and bubble up. The mind gets busy and distracted, and difficult states of mind might arise. But it is possible, at some point, that we will not get tricked by them. We will not get pulled into them. We stay independent and free of them. We are not caught or entangled. They still arise, but because we are independent and free of them, there is a disinclination to identify with them, as in: “This is who I am.”

Then there is the last quality of something ceasing. Something has stopped – namely our preoccupations, beliefs, and attachment to ideas of self that tend to bring conceit and self-concern.

The stopping of self-preoccupation, self-concern, and self-consciousness does not happen totally, but we have a flavor, feeling, or taste of this. And we let it be part of mindfulness as well. Mindfulness is not entangled or caught up in being self-conscious or self-critical. There is a clear sense that awareness itself is free of self-concern, self-preoccupation, and self-identity.

Mindfulness then has a very different quality. It becomes more an expression of the Dharma moving through us, rather than something we identify with as the doer or the agent. We are more an enabler than an agent. We get out of the way. We allow awareness to be there.

And in this field of freedom and independence, we notice that something has stopped. There is space for everything. I like to think that, in Buddhism, we give liberation to everything else. Everything becomes liberated from our entanglement and concern. Saying “I am liberated” does not make sense anymore. It doesn’t make sense to say, “I am liberated. I’m free.”

As we have seen in the suttas – the teachings of the Buddha – the ultimate goal is described over and over again in terms of negation. Liberation is the negation of being entangled or in bondage. We are free now. Seclusion or independence is perhaps liberation from being dependent in an unhealthy way – or being claustrophobic in the middle of all kinds of concerns.

Cessation is an ending of suffering, of clinging. There is a strong tendency for the Buddha to repeatedly define the ultimate goal of practice as taking us towards an absence – not the presence of something.

If he talks about the presence of something, it mostly seems to be in terms of peace. It is beautiful that even with the experience of liberation – a palpable feeling of freedom, independence, and absence of suffering – when we are free, there is no inclination to make it into something. We do not make it something we hold onto or say that it is the presence of something.

Even asserting the presence of something is a way of grasping and clinging. There is an uncompromising attitude of just trusting letting go, being free, the mind not clinging to anything. In letting go, there is a beautiful way in which nourishing stillness, silence, and spaciousness can arise. When letting go is interpenetrated with love, compassion, care, and wisdom, it is not frozen or disconnected. But it is not the same as being connected either. It is being free.

So the practice of *ānāpānasati* ends this way. It ends with the reference point of practicing based on the qualities of awakening itself. In some ways, these qualities of awakening are available for everyone well before becoming liberated.

In fact, that is often what Dharma teachers are trying to do when they say: “Practice nonreactively, with nonreactive awareness. Practice non-judgmental awareness. Practice open awareness.” They are trying to get at the qualities of awakening that are already there, so that we grow into them and they develop and come to fulfillment.

Finally, don't worry so much about the path of practice. The only thing to be concerned with and happy about is exactly the place where you are in your practice. That is the place where practice and the Dharma unfold. Be content and happy. Discover awareness of where you are at – not where you think you should be.

We will have one more talk on this topic tomorrow. Maybe for this next day, you can look around and see if you have been overlooking silence, stillness, spaciousness, independence, freedom, and cessation, endings. See if you can be nourished and supported by them. Thank you.