

Tuesday Dharma Talk – Seven Factors of Awakening

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In talking about the instruction in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, I try to show that in the second foundation, a distinction is made between feeling tones of the flesh and feeling tones not of the flesh. The feeling tones of the flesh are sometimes explained in commentaries as having to do with sensual pleasures, but also with the feeling tones that come from attachment and clinging, which can be pleasant and unpleasant.

So on the one hand there are those feeling tones, and then there are feeling tones that are not of the flesh, provisionally called “dharmic pleasures.” These have to do with pleasures that don't belong to the ordinary sense worlds. They have to do with the pleasant and unpleasant feelings associated with the path of non-attachment and non-clinging. There is this distinction.

In the third foundation, there's also a distinction between a mind that is preoccupied and caught in something like greed, hatred, or delusion and a mind that is not. These are the painful activities of the mind that are associated with attachment, and with the influence they have on the mind – whether it is contracted, scattered, or fragmented. These states of mind are contrasted with states of mind that occur with the absence of clinging, the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion, when the mind isn't characterized by or influenced by these states. It's kind of remarkable that we have minds or hearts that can have these beautiful, marvelous feelings, and lead to expansive states. (I don't know what the Pali word is for this important English word) but we can have states of mind that lead to, “Wow,” and then, “Wow, there's even better. I can feel it.”

These are states of mind where the mind is amazingly enveloped and immersed in *samādhi*. Exactly how to translate *samādhi* into English is not so clear. Certainly, people have preferences. Sometimes I think it's better to just use a whole bunch of words to get the sense of it: settled, composed, steady, unified, and undistracted. One translated recently translated it as “immersed” – immersed in something. Regardless, it's pretty cool. It's amazing the mind has the capacity for these very clean, cleansed states of mind. The mind is cleansed of attachments, clinging, fear, and preoccupation.

It is also amazing that there's a capacity to be liberated and freed of clinging – really freed, where we can sense the absence of any kind of clinging. Here again, there's a distinction being made between these two sides. Simply put, the distinction is between the experiences we have that are conditioned by or arise from clinging, and the experiences we have that arise from non-clinging.

When we get to the fourth foundation, we see the same distinction. The first one listed, the hindrances, is the entry point for really understanding clinging in a deep way. Compared to what comes later in terms of the *sutta* and the *sutta* lists, this is probably where it's easiest to see and address and get to the bottom of clinging – the activities of the mind that are involved in clinging and cause suffering.

The entry point in this text for understanding the path to liberation – what leads to liberation – is the Seven Factors of Awakening. Here we come to some really beautiful beautiful activities or qualities. Some people call them “states of mind” or “processes of the mind.” They are wondrous and to be celebrated. Sometimes the Seven Factors of Awakening are called “the crown jewels” of Buddhism. These crown jewels are not kept in a vault.

What I'm hoping to convey here – this happens in many ways in these ancient texts – is that distinctions are being made. These are distinctions that we can see, and that are meaningful and useful to know about. Because if you can see distinctions, you have some ability to choose between them. If you don't see distinctions, you aren't able to choose. If you don't see the fork in the road, you might end up taking the fork that is the wrong one for you. But if you see the fork in the road, then maybe you can take the one that's going where you want to go. If you want to go to the end of suffering, if you've suffered enough for one lifetime (only if – I hope you have, so you're motivated to take the road that leads away from suffering) it's useful to see that fork that we come to.

It turns out it's a fork we come to every step along the way. It's always there. Which fork do we take? It's okay to take a little detour into the clinging world. I think it comes back. “After all,” we think, “going to the non-clinging world might make me too unprotected. It's clinging that protects me and keeps me safe.” Clinging certainly doesn't keep you safe from yourself. And that's the ultimate safety – when we learn how to be a safe person for ourselves. The ultimate freedom is knowing how to generate and live the freedom within ourselves and bring it into the world.

These two distinctions – clinging and non-clinging – are represented in this text by the hindrances and the Seven Factors. In the ancient texts, we see that the Buddha often gave teachings contrasting the hindrances and the Seven Factors. They are almost representative of the two different paths to be taken.

I think it's fantastic that the path that's free from suffering is not a dull path. When I was ordained as a Zen priest, my father went to the Abbot and said he was worried I was going to have a boring life. But it has been the opposite. It has been a grand life. The adventures and the discoveries are better than traveling to a new country. It is traveling to a new place inside.

But I love the fact that the Buddha referred to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as “our ancestral homeland.” Isn't that cool? Not only do you find the Dharma in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, but you also find your home country, which you have been away from for a while, so it's nice to go home. There are all these positive associations. Taking this path to be free of suffering is a grand thing, a beautiful thing, an inspiring thing, and it gives birth to these wonderful qualities within.

In my early years in Buddhism, I didn't get that sense. In fact, sometimes in Zen when really nice things were happening inside, they called it “*mako*,” which is delusion. It was just one more thing to let go of. That was a common expression: just let go, let go. In some ways that was a good teaching to receive, but for a young, impressionable boy like me, it felt as if we were not supposed to have a good time in this practice. It seemed as if we were not supposed to allow this inner beauty to bubble up, or appreciate our natural capacity for beauty and purity. “Purity” is a word that I didn't like when I was younger. Maybe we have to be careful with it. That's the disclaimer: this talk is dangerous for your mind. The inner purity. It's a beautiful thing to discover a kind of inner cleanliness, or inner purity, and to know it's possible.

We have the five hindrances and seven factors. Long ago I talked about the qualities of the *Dhamma*: it's visible here and now; it's immediate; it invites us to take a good look, to inspect; it's onward leading; and it's to be experienced by the wise. I'd like to point out that, especially with the idea of onward leading, the *Dhamma* is

onward leading – we are not the driver of onward leading. We're not the active doer of onward leading. In fact, we are not the cause. We are not the makers of the cause that causes us to go on this onward leading path.

Using causal language (i.e., A causes B; If you do X, then Y) is something that you see the Buddha repeatedly avoiding. He sometimes does this very explicitly, when he talks about the inner growth and development in meditation, in the deeper spiritual life, in the onward leading life. I think the reason he avoids causal language is that within us there is a natural capacity to grow and develop. We can nourish, nurture, and support but we don't cause.

It's like you can't grow a beautiful flower if the flower bed is covered with weeds. You remove the weeds and put the seed in the ground, but you don't cause the seed to germinate. You don't stand above it and order it. You can't do the fine genetic manipulations that are going to cause the enzymes to be released, the seed to expand and dissolve the seed coat, and create the roots. You just support this natural process. The farmer doesn't pull on the plant as it's growing to make it grow faster or see how it's doing.

Pulling the plant out of the ground and pulling on the roots a little to try to stretch it so it grows faster would probably kill it. If we spend a lot of time pulling, tugging, and pushing our inner life, we might actually kill something. It doesn't work that way. It's amazing that there is something inside that can grow and develop. We can nourish it. We can be the hen that sits on the eggs to let the chicks and eggs develop, but we can't engineer this process.

So we're not the cause. We don't provide the cause. We provide the conditions. And we're not looking for causes. We're looking for how to get out of the way and support something natural to evolve and develop. One way to do that, which seemingly is presented over and over again in this tradition, is to allow things to arise, to see things to arise, and to make room for things to arise, without the weeds. The hindrances are the weeds. They obscure and cover over.

But the Seven Factors of Awakening are the flowers growing out of the seedbed, which we can nourish and support. I love the Seven Factors of Awakening. I love to think of examples of how we can experience them without making them happen. Maybe this is very specific to me, but sometimes when I wake up from an afternoon nap and the light is just right, I just feel so content. The biggest danger for me with taking naps is that when I wake up, I don't want to get out of bed because I'm so content. Nothing needs to happen. I can lie there like everything's perfect. Why do anything?

But what I like to do is to lie there and see the Seven Factors of Awakening present in me. I had a good nap. I wake up really clear. I'm not energized, but there's good vitality present. I'm not dull, so there is awareness. There's a clarity of awareness and I'm really here. Then it's very interesting to lie and look at the light going through the dust in the room. I just watch it – wow. I see the cracks in the ceiling – wow. There is present-moment awareness. It's nice to be here. I feel refreshed. So there's awareness. Thank you.

And there's clarity – the capacity to make these distinctions. The second factor of awakening is distinguishing the *Dhammas*, distinguishing mental states, processes, or activities. For example, we see clearly the wholesome versus the unwholesome, and clinging versus non-clinging. This factor is the ability to see clearly what's here. Wow, look at all that dust. Look at the light coming in. The light is so clear and the shadows and the light beams against the ceiling and the wall are so beautiful and sharp and distinct. You start seeing clearly. That's the second factor of awakening. The factor of awakening for distinguishing *Dhammas*.

The third factor of awakening is effort, engagement, or vitality. The Pali word is a powerful word that sometimes it might be nice to translate as "courage," except that sounds like we're working at it too much. But it's a powerful vitality of really stepping up and engaging. This doesn't have to mean that we engage. It's as if the energy is

there holding us up. Waking up from the nap, clearly, I can't fall back to sleep again. I'm clear and the energy is very vital. The *chi* is there. I just feel delighted. I feel cozy and happy and a kind of joy. The joy factor of awakening is right there when I wake up from my nap.

I'm pretty calm, but it's a special calm, in that it's calm without exactly feeling calm. It's the absence of agitation or excitement. It is a nice feeling. It's not dull; it's not like I'm going to sink into the calm and not want to do anything. This is the tranquility factor of awakening.

Is there *samādhi*? I don't know if I'd call it *samādhi* when I wake up from a nap. But there is a capacity to be non-distracted. I'm just there. It's amazing to watch the dance of the dust and the sunlight. That's it. Then the equanimity factor of awakening, the last one. At that moment, at least, lying in bed and content, I'm not troubled by anything. I'm not reacting to anything. There's no tendency to want to react to anything. Everything seems okay. I feel pretty tranquil, equanimous, and peaceful.

I went on and on with that example. I apologize. But the reason for this is I wanted to try to show how, in certain situations, hints or qualities of the Seven Factors of Awakening can be there without us making them happen or calling upon them. I had to do the right thing and create the conditions for them – I had to take a nap. That was my contribution. Then something happened. (Wow, this is pretty cool.) The nap didn't cause those factors to be there. If anything, I feel the nap kind of cleared the mind of its debris, its tiredness, and its preoccupations, and there they were. They felt like a natural part of the mind. They are a beautiful capacity – a beautiful, wholesome side of the equation, a non-clinging side of the mind. Wow.

In the Buddha's instructions for the Seven Factors of Awakening, the usual English translations that come from the earlier? commentaries say that we're supposed to see each of the seven factors more or less in the same way that we see the hindrances. We see if they're present and know they're present. If they're not present, we know they're not present. The later *Theravāda* interpretation is that you should see how the cause for them arises. And that's a good thing to see. If there's a cause, you can work with it. It's not a bad thing to see if there is such a thing.

But causality is a higher order of involvement. Seeing the cause and contributing to the cause is a way of being involved. We're kind of in there working the system, working to make it work. It's an analysis that's not exactly immediate and visible. For example with the hindrances, if I'm caught up in sensual desire, "Okay, I'm supposed to see how this happened and what caused it. Okay, let me remember. Oh yeah. You know, X happened at lunch and now I'm filled with ill will. I know what caused it – that person." Then we get confused.

But in this process of deepening meditation practice, deepening into here – deepening into where something is visible, immediate, to be seen directly, and onward leading – at some point, we're not looking at causes, we're seeing things arise and seeing things pass away. With the hindrances, we not only see them pass away, but we see they pass away in such a way that there is such a deep release and letting go of them, giving them up, that they're abandoned and do not rise again.

With the Seven Factors of Awakening, we see them arise. And we see them arise in such a way that they can continue growing and developing until they reach fulfillment. That's a lovely word – bringing something to fulfillment, bringing the Seven Factors of Awakening to fulfillment. But the text doesn't say that we caused the fulfillment. We create the conditions for it. We create the conditions for it partly by recognizing them and allowing the whole process to develop. A

One classic way of understanding the Seven Factors of Awakening is that they are sequential. So as awareness gets stronger and more developed, awareness becomes clearer. The clarity of mind sees distinctions, the second factor of awakening. The key distinction that the Buddha wants us to make is not between strawberry ice

cream and vanilla ice cream, but rather, between clinging to ice cream and not clinging to it – between the world of attachment and the world of non-attachment, the skillful and the unskillful, the helpful and unhelpful. We are to really see that: “Oh, there's the fork.”

Inviting inspection, onward-leading. If you're really settled, if you have a heightened sensitivity to the body, to the heart, and the mind, it's my belief (and maybe it's unique to me) that something inside that's not you will choose the wholesome. When it is really clear, something inside will choose the path of least resistance, the path of least stress, the path of most opening, the path of greater freedom, and the path of greater ease.

It's not much different, I think, from a ball or water on a hillside. Unless something blocks it, it will run downhill, following the path of least resistance. Clinging is work. Clinging is effort. It's exhausting. Clinging creates all kinds of obstacles and headaches. Clinging produces more clinging. Clinging creates such agitation, such discomfort that as a result, many people will cling more. When you choose the path of non-clinging, it begets more of the same. You feel, “Ah, this is good. Let's continue with this.” It keeps opening, keeps releasing.

There's an energy for the wholesome that arises. There's an enthusiasm for the wholesome. “This is good. This is the direction to go.” Now there's engagement in the practice. The key engagement is “Let's show up. Let's really be present. This is good. I got here by really showing up, by really seeing and being aware. Let's keep doing this.” Then we choose the wholesome, engage in the wholesome, find the wholesome, and recognize the wholesome influence and impact of this path of waking up.

It brings a sense of well-being, joy, pleasure, and delight. It even brings rapture and ecstasy. Some people are amazed at the level of sustained well-being that can come with this meditation practice. Our psychophysical system has a capacity for so much well-being. When there's well-being, there's something very reassuring in it. The dangers and the fears and resentments we have kind of melt away. There's a deep reassurance that maybe just being alive is enough. This is good.

Then something settles and becomes tranquil. Tranquility sets in. With tranquility, there's very little distractibility. If there's no distractibility, *samādhi* bubbles up. Whenever I get well-concentrated, I always feel it's a gift. I feel so grateful for the gift. I never feel that I caused the concentrated state. I just contributed conditions. If I contribute the conditions the best I can, I don't want to know why sometimes those conditions come together and I get into a concentrated state and why other times I don't, because I just love this reverence. I love the reverence and a sense, almost, of the sacredness of this Dharma process that unfolds. I benefit from it and I trust it.

So there is a trust of *samādhi*, of these deeper states. That trust might be what gives rise to equanimity. There are more conditions for equanimity, but a strong, stable mind that feels healthy, happy, and contented has very little need to react to anything. It has very little need to be for and against the experiences that come through. You can sit there and just observe, see, and be aware, which starts the whole process over again, so it's like a spiral. The Seven Factors of Awakening get stronger and stronger.

We see the appearance, the arising, of the seven factors – “Oh, there it is. There is awareness.” In the retreat, when you get distracted, when you go off in thought and you notice you're distracted, right there is awareness. When I noticed I had wandered off in thought, I used to jerk my mind back to the breathing so I could be aware. I didn't notice that I was already aware, so I just irritated my mind by jerking it around. No wonder the mind didn't want to cooperate with me.

Notice the mind go off and then notice that's the case. Notice that awareness is right there. What if you call that “awareness” provisionally (because it's probably not real yet in terms of the factors of awakening)? “Wow, look at that – awareness.” I think that's almost a factor of awakening or maybe a pseudo-factor of awakening. Here it's

the precursor to the Seven Factors of Awakening, just enough to be reverent. We can have a kind of reverence for just being aware.

That is very different than discovering you're aware and thinking, "Okay, I'm going to get to work here because I'm going to get myself really enlightened today. I'm going to do something really good, benefit from it, get some wisdom, and become a cool person. They'll give me the badge of honor at IRC and I'll be able to go around with my Dharma medals for how amazingly not-self I am."

Instead of getting selfishly involved with trying to get something out of it, we can have reverence for this deep process that's within us. It is healthy, holy, and beautiful. It is something that we don't have to orchestrate. But we have to trust it. Trust in the Dharma is trust that the Dharma is in us, that there is something here that can bubble up. Chicks are incubating, and they will hatch. There are seeds that will germinate; there are plants that will grow.

The beginning of finding clarity is waking up from being distracted and appreciating the awareness that you have now, before you jerk the mind. Have the reverence to know and to feel that this is special, and decide, "Let's give ourselves more to this awareness. Let's open to it." Then at some point, there's enough clarity to see distinctions. There's enough settledness to see the difference between being unsettled and settled. There's enough release in the shoulders to see the difference between what happens in the shoulders when you cling and what happens in the shoulders (or belly) when you don't cling.

We start seeing so much information about clinging and non-clinging. If you understand the value of that – that each time you're right there where the fork in the road is – maybe there's an enthusiasm to really do this practice. "Yes" – it's a big, "Yes. Let's stay close to awareness in a reverential way. Let's trust this deep Dharma process that mostly just needs us to show up."

It is as if by being aware, we create the open space within which something can grow. If we're in the hindrances, we've covered everything over. It's like putting a heavy blanket, through which no light can come, over the plants that are growing so they don't grow. They get crushed and there's no light. The hindrances cover the factors of awakening. Open up, let the light come in, let something grow.

Start to recognize the factors of awakening when they're occurring – not searching for them or trying to make them happen, but appreciating them when they're there. The Buddha said the food that nourishes the factors of awakening to grow is themselves. Tranquility is the food for tranquility. If you want to become tranquil, recognize tranquility. That's what brings more tranquility. That's kind of nice. Maybe awareness or mindfulness is the food for more mindfulness. These things can grow and develop.

One of the aspects of not-self is to trust that there's something within you, the Dharma, that you don't have to be in charge of, which is good, healthy, and beneficial. The Dharma teachings of the Buddha directly or indirectly recognize that there's tremendously precious, valuable, and beautiful that exists within us. Sometimes he uses the word "beauty" for the Dharma. Aren't we lucky that this is part of the human experience, a human possibility?

The Dharma can be covered up a lot, but the covers can come off. Learn to recognize and become an expert and specialist in recognizing the hindrances. The very recognition, the very awareness that the hindrances are present is the awareness that begins the process of the factors of awakening. It isn't like I have to be aware of the hindrances so that I can get rid of them, and so that I can get onto the factors of awakening. But right there, just the awareness of whatever you are doing is so special. What I love about it is that there's something about full awareness or satisfied awareness or clear awareness that doesn't require anything to be any different.

Some of us will have a really high-class hindrance attack, and we'll think, "If only I didn't have the hindrance.." There is no need to not have it. When you see a sensual desire really clearly, it is not a hindrance. The sensual desire is not a hindrance, it's just the object of attention, of clarity. Ill will is only a hindrance if it's hindering, if it's covering something. But if you clearly see it as ill will, right there, there's awareness. Seeing it can be enough. With the clear seeing of something in that way, you've taken the fork that goes to the wholesome. Then remember to do it again. Don't collapse back into the hindrance.

Really trust awareness. Trust the capacity that's present to make room, to make space, to allow for something that you can't cause to begin to show itself and grow in you – the Dharma flower and the Dharma plant. In the metaphor of the plant for the cultivation of our practice, when this practice comes to fulfillment, it's literally called "the fruit of practice." Just as the end result of a tree that grows is its fruit.

In the same way, we are growing a fruit that comes from clear awareness, leading to distinctions, effort, joy, tranquility, a very deep unification, and then the development of *samādhī* into equanimity. This is an equanimity where the mind is so ready, so content, so at peace with itself, so ready to step through the door that we leave behind our attachments. If the word "reverence" is a nice word for you, may you continue your practice with a degree of reverence for all this. May the caring, careful, careingly careful, carefully caring, loving attention continue moment by moment so that this inner garden can grow and fruit. Thank you.