

Seven Factors of Enlightenment - Concentration Part 1

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So welcome to our Dharma practice day. And for those of you who are new to these days, they are designed for us as a way for us to engage in particular topics of Dharma practice in a deeper way than we can usually do it and in a variety of ways. Very loosely, the model for these kinds of days is the ways in which people learn the Dharma in monasteries, where traditionally in Buddhism, monasteries are not places for silent retreats. There are sometimes silent periods, but there are periods of meditation, periods of community work, community engagement, conversations, and there are a lot of different ways in which the people in the monastery interact with each other as ways of exploring the Dharma.

They often have opportunities for discussing the teachings. The abbot or the abbess might give a talk, and then later in the day over lunch or during breaks during the work or something, people will talk about that topic and engage with it. Many times the learning that happens in monasteries happens between peers as much as it happens between the teacher and the students. And so part of that also is creating community around exploring and practicing the Dharma together. And so with that in mind, these days are meant to provide some of those benefits of what happens in the monastery by giving you a chance to often interact with each other around topics.

So sometimes there's some guided meditation, some teaching that I do, but often I turn it over to you, and in small group conversations, sometimes in paired conversations, two of you will pair up and engage in a very personal way around some of these themes and topics that we're exploring. And so there's a variety of different ways. So in each day, things are, you know, it can be, you know, I'll think of new ways or different ways in order to do it. This year, the theme for the year is the seven factors of awakening, which are very significant qualities that get awakened, that get developed, in people who do mindfulness practice, do Buddhist practice. And the strengthening of these, developing of these, sets the stage for the maturation of insight, the maturation of practice, for deeper insight, for awakening itself.

Learning to recognize these as they develop in practice is meant as a supportive means of letting these become stronger. Recognizing and appreciating good inner qualities strengthens those qualities. If those qualities begin to bubble up but they're ignored, then sometimes

they don't really develop as effectively or efficiently as if they were recognized and appreciated. And so the seven factors of awakening are divided into different classes, different times that they're divided up in different ways. For the purposes of today, I'd like to divide them between those factors which come most into play when we do mindfulness practice and those factors that mostly come into play when we do concentration practice.

Or I shouldn't say it that way. Those factors that arise mostly in association with the mindfulness part of practice and those factors that come into play mostly associated with the concentration side of practice. So the mindfulness side of practice involves a lot of mindfulness itself, involves the engagement with the efforting of practice, and then also with the discernment or investigation of what's actually going on, a deeper comprehension of what's happening here, that mindfulness allows us to happen. And the concentration side of practice has a lot to do with developing of inner senses of well-being, joy, happiness. It has to do with tranquility, serenity, developing some states of peace. It has to do with concentration itself, deeper engaged states of concentration. And it has to do with equanimity, deeper stages of equanimity.

So that's kind of the division in between. There's these two sides of practice. There's the mindfulness side and the concentration side. And those two sides work hand in hand. And it's very important, I feel, to appreciate how they support each other and work together. I don't believe they're meant to be kind of radically separated from each other. When you do concentration practice, you need a fair amount of mindfulness. When you do mindfulness, you need a fair amount of concentration. And they work very well together. But they are distinguished from each other.

So today, we've been doing, during this course this year, we've been doing the seven factors of awakening. And today we've come to *samādhi*, usually translated into English as concentration. So it's the sixth of the seven factors of awakening. And we'll have one more, and then a class on equanimity. And then the final class will be a kind of a synthesis and a description of how all these things work together in a much more integrated way.

And in that today's topic is concentration, I thought that maybe the best way of kind of getting into the topic is by spending the morning in silence with a series of guided meditations, some teaching around the topic, and then just kind of getting concentrated. Wouldn't that be nice? Yes. And then in the afternoon I thought we could turn around a little bit and have more discussion around the topics and the issues around concentration. So I'd like to say a few more. So let's keep the morning basically in silence. Maybe we can do a break or do some

walking meditation. If you want to talk to me about the topic, you can come and talk to me. Let me think here. So I want to say a few more introductory words before we actually do a sitting.

The seven factors of awakening are really beautiful qualities of mind or heart. And they're considered to be kind of like the crown jewels of Buddhist practice. They're so beautiful, they're like jewels. And to be able to have these develop strongly in the heart or in the mind or within us, so they kind of stand out in relief or in highlight, is one of the great things to experience. It's like one of the, you know, they become the seven wonders of the world. To really, some of you have had experiences in your life that have been touchstones and very meaningful for you.

To develop these qualities to a high degree—mindfulness and tranquility and joy and concentration, equanimity—is a really beautiful thing. And to know that we have that capacity of the heart to develop it and cultivate it is a great thing. A very important part of Buddhist spirituality is to appreciate that the... I like to use the word heart here. The word mind and heart are often treated as synonyms. But I like the word heart sometimes because it's closer to our emotional center, where most people feel is somehow more intimate to some deeper quality of being, of who they are, than they often associate with mind.

So the heart, as this kind of deep inner capacity of ourselves, is seen in Buddhism as an activity, not as a thing. It's a series of activities, it's processes. And sometimes these processes get rusted, or they get kind of set in a groove, and they get very set and tight or solidified or reified. And they don't budge very easily. We get set in our habits, set in our ways. And not only in our behavior, but also in our inner activity of how the mind functions.

But because it's an activity, it can be shaped in different ways. It can be loosened up. We can apply a rust remover to these activities so they become more lubricated and fluid. We can emphasize some activities over other activities. We can stop some activities which are not helpful for us. And we can cultivate activities which are helpful for us for particular purposes. And so a very important part of Buddhist spirituality is to appreciate the malleable quality of our hearts.

And that we don't have to be stuck with the heart we have. We can shape and change how it is. And so then to monitor this inner life, to have enough mindfulness and presence to be able to monitor what's going on here, and then to begin shaping it or directing it or moving it in ways which are more useful for us to cultivate and develop an inner life that's—when we turn and look at our inner life, our inside, psychological life, our hearts—that we see something

that is really deeply satisfying, something that's delightful or joyful or meaningful for us, our heart becomes a place that seems like a home to us, a place of comfort or a meaningful place to dwell.

I think for a lot of people, enough people in our society, if they bring any kind of mindfulness to their inner life, they see turmoil and conflict and criticism and agitation and fear and greed and anger and many, many different things that are not actually that welcoming. And you don't necessarily want to kind of rest there or stay there. And for some people the inner life is so disturbing that they don't want to go there. They recoil from it and they go off. Part of the reason why people run off trying to change the external world or distract themselves is because the inner life is not very satisfying.

So in Buddhism we're trying to change its inner landscape so that it becomes a satisfying place to be. Not as an end in itself, but as the inner landscape, the inner ecology becomes a satisfying, happy place to be, a settled place to be, then that heart becomes malleable or soft enough that transformation can happen, that some deeper awakening can happen, some deeper insight can happen. But it requires us to begin monitoring the inner life in a wise way. Monitoring what goes on inside gives us more information about what's going on inside with our psychology, our actions, our thoughts, our feelings, our reactions. And if your inner life has a strong habit of self-criticism, then sometimes self-knowledge is not good news because you learn about yourself and turn it around and use that information to be more upset and more depressed and what goes on.

So part of this mindfulness practice is to learn how to monitor oneself and not to pick up or not to relate to what we see inside if it's not so pretty. Not to relate to it with any aversion or conflict, but rather to learn how to deal with it very lightly or wisely. And the example that I wanted to give that maybe kind of is interesting. So my seven-year-old son sleeps about 11 ½ hours every night. He sleeps very deeply, amazingly deeply. So deeply he doesn't always realize he has to pee. So he can't really sleep through the whole night without wetting the bed often.

So what we do is, when I go to bed in the evening, he's already been asleep for a couple hours, I will wake him up and take him to the bathroom. And if he can pee, then he gets through the night just fine. But he's really deeply asleep. So I, you know, and the first times I did this, boy, was it a fight. I didn't know how to do it, he didn't know, you know, whatever. But now it's kind of beautiful. It's very touching to me. I feel kind of, it's very tender towards him, and doing this. It's a lovely thing. It's like a little tea ceremony going there.

And, you know, tea ceremony. And I get down on my knees next to his bed and I explain to him that it's time to get up. He's still sleeping, right? It's time to go. And I touch him and he kind of begins to stir and wake up and give him a chance, take the covers off him, give him a chance to get up by himself, which he never does. And then very gently I take his legs and I swing them out to the edge of the bed and then kind of lever, what is it, lever, kind of push them down on them so that his upper part of the body kind of sits up. And by that time he's awake enough to be able to start to stand up and start walking to the bathroom.

But he's basically sleepwalking. And so he'll go out to his bedroom, into the hallway, and oftentimes head for the living room rather than the bathroom. Or, you know, after we finish in the toilet, he's still sleepwalking, basically. So then he's also, like, he heads out of the bathroom, and he heads again right into the living room for the kitchen. He walks right by his bedroom door. And so now I'm getting to the point of why I'm telling the story. So, you know, I have a purpose. I have an intention, which is to get him either into the bathroom or into his bed. And I'm really clear, this is what has to happen.

But I don't just kind of yank him, you know, grab him and throw him into his bed or into the bathroom. I very gently bring my hands, and as gently, as softly as I can, I kind of touch his shoulder. I try to monitor him and be as tender as I can. And just ever so lightly, just enough tension to nudge him in the direction. And sometimes it's not quite enough and I have to kind of, sometimes I have to go with him. Like actually kind of follow him into the living room because he's not quite ready to turn around. But I kind of go along with it for a while. But I know what I'm doing, I'm trying to do. And then I gently kind of redirect him and turn him around and kind of bring him in. To me, it's very sweet, the gentleness of it. But it's very intentful also. I know what I'm doing, what I'm setting myself to do.

So the same thing with monitoring oneself in meditation practice. You want to be very gentle with this mind, with this heart. The heart has a mind of its own. Most of our hearts are basically sleepwalking most of the time anyway. And so you want to be very careful. You don't want to kind of pounce on it and yank it around and be upset with it. After all, a kid's sleepwalking. He doesn't know what he's doing. So your poor mind is sleepwalking. It doesn't know what it's doing. And probably most of our minds, when we're sleepwalking, we're probably like two years old anyway.

But the adult part of you, the part that can monitor, needs to monitor in a way that's compassionate and caring, but also has a kind of intentness to it. And so to begin then to kind of gently, in an appropriate way, turn. Maybe at first very lightly, at times very lightly, hardly

anything is needed at all. At other times it has to be firm, but in a loving firmness. But begin monitoring what goes on and finding a way to relate to this inner life so that we slowly begin letting go of our distracted thinking, the preoccupations the mind has to think about other things beyond here and now.

And gently begin turning the mind, the heart, to be engaged and be present for what's actually happening here and now. To be present for our breathing, if that's what the focus is going to be. And say, here, this here, here, gentle mind. You're supposed to be here on the breath. Stay here on the breath. And it'll head toward the living room and you bring it back. Here, stay here, stay here. And with time, it all becomes much more harmonious. And it's pretty harmonious with my son now, this whole thing. You know, it's kind of a gentle thing. I enjoy it now. I hope that it has some lasting positive impression on him. He doesn't remember in the morning at all, but who knows what goes on subliminally.

So there is this kind of quality that's very important as we're monitoring ourselves, we're staying on top of each other, and we're beginning to train ourselves. We're beginning to shape the inner life. And so in Buddhist practice we're taking responsibility for this training. Buddhism is not a magical practice where by magic something's going to happen to you. And we're not relying on some kind of particular insight as being the solution to it all. There are powerful insights and understandings that can come, but really to really do it in a mature way that really allows for some lasting transformation, you really want to start with the basics and begin taking responsibility for what goes on inside your heart and in a loving way beginning to say no to certain activities, let go of certain activities, and begin nudging it or directing it with intentness, with a kindness towards a kind of to the cultivation of these inner qualities, like stronger concentration, to really be able to capacity to stay focused, not just for a moment with something like the breath, but to be able to stay connected to the breath over a longer and longer continuous period of time.

And as the mind can stay with the breathing, can be more concentrated in the breath, that's an antidote, a correction, to the mind being preoccupied by other things, by its other habits that it has. In a sense, we want to develop a good habit, a useful habit, the habit to be able to stay focused on something that's skillful and helpful. Some of you might ask, well, I'm very concentrated generally. I'm very absorbed in my sexual fantasies. And, you know, that works just fine for me. But that's not considered to be the appropriate concentration we're trying to develop when we're doing Buddhist practice, because it involves a certain kind of preoccupation, a kind of certain lostness, a kind of clinging in that kind of absorption.

The kind of absorption we're trying to develop in Buddhist practice is one that is not characterized by any kind of clinging or preoccupation. It's occupation without preoccupation. Its ability to stay present without there being some kind of drivenness or compulsion as part of it. So how do we find this level of concentration? How do we find it? We find it partly by just repeated practice over and over again. And then with time, the mind will find its way. But also we find it by being sensitive to how it is that we're practicing. Are we practicing in a way that's conducive to relaxation? Are we practicing in a way that's conducive to being intent? This is what I'm doing here. I'm serious about this, but I'm also doing it in a way that allows me to relax and to soften and be more present here.

So that's kind of the background to all this. And so for this morning, I thought we would spend the morning in silence. I'll do some guided meditation around this and then we'll see what you learn about yourself in the process of trying to do concentration practice. Sometimes the most valuable part of developing concentration, a session, a period of concentration practice, is not necessarily we got concentrated, but in the process of attempting to do so we learn something about how our mind works. We learn about the challenges we're up against. And so some of you today maybe will learn really well how agitated your mind is, how distracted your mind is. But don't be discouraged by that. Take that as a really important part of what needs to happen. You really need to take stock and understand how your mind works so you can find just the right place to gently hold on to those shoulders and nudge the mind in the right way.

Also in that regard, sometimes Buddhist practice doesn't really begin until you fail at it. So if you find that this concentration practice doesn't work, sooner or later Buddhist practice is not supposed to work. So some people come to that point early, some people come to it later, some people come to that all the time. And some people's Buddhist practice develops beautifully because it's just one continuous mistake. It just doesn't work all the time. So don't worry about how well you do. Just try to do your best. And if it doesn't work, use that as an opportunity to learn something about yourself and to let go of maybe some of your expectations and demands you have. Buddhist practice works when it doesn't work. So don't worry about it not working.