

7 Factors: Energy

Gil Fronsdal

January 28, 2026

Keywords: vipassanā, seven factors of awakening, sati, dhammavicaya, vīriya, pīti, Eightfold Path, sammā-padhāna, jhāna, dependent arising

I believe that before I was practicing *vipassanā*, in my years of Zen practice, I believe I never learned about the seven factors of awakening.

If I did, it was just a list.

And then I was introduced to *vipassanā*.

I don't remember exactly receiving teachings on them in my early years in Burma, but I must have.

But what I do remember was when they arose in my *vipassanā* practice so clearly.

It was kind of like if you're looking deep into the dark night sky, and maybe it's a time when it just seems magnificent, it seems just profound and kind of a source of an existential wonder, both this vast universe and being alive within it.

And then you see stars and constellations and sparkling.

It was kind of, literally like that, like looking at this big, dark, beautiful night sky, and then seeing these seven factors of awakening or sensing them, perceiving them, as the main show, the main thing, the only thing, like the stars.

And I was in awe.

And I've kind of marveled that there can be these very simple experiences, faculties, states of mind, that can have this kind of very clear, be seen, such clarity.

Oh, look at this.

Like equanimity, wow, this equanimity is a thing.

The word equanimity actually matches something that's very distinct and clear.

It's not vague or amorphous, it's just not kind of some general non-reactivity or balance.

Amazingly beautiful.

Remember thinking of it sitting there in Burma and thinking to myself somehow spontaneously of this.

I don't think I've ever seen anything as beautiful.

So I associate these seven factors of awakening, maybe because of that, almost as if they're part of the great mystery of life, that this should arise, they should be a capacity we have, and be there to support us.

And I say this with a hope that I'm not setting you up to suffer more by the idea that it's supposed to be this grand experience like that.

But what I'm hoping to convey is that in doing the *vipassanā* practice, really settling into it, I think it's best to consider a radical paradigm shift.

Like you're going into a whole new culture, a whole new world, where the rules of the game that you're used to no longer apply.

So, kind of.

And one of the things that doesn't apply is a very simplistic cause and effect idea.

You do X, Y will happen.

So you know you want something to happen, you want to get concentrated, well just sit down and look at your breath.

One, two, three.

Or if you just can be mindful, you'll become liberated.

It's cause and effect or something.

Now there's this idea of forest bathing, and I understand forest bathing is not this narrow cause and effect.

There's a whole ecosystem of things that somehow touch our senses.

Some of them we don't even know what it is.

Maybe it's the ions in the air, the pheromones the plants release.

Who knows what's all the things that are going on?

The natural world and its beauty and maybe peace.

And it does something to the whole system.

The whole system, some people, the whole system kind of relaxes, it's subtle, feels nourished, the ordinary world drops away.

And so they call it bathing for a reason.

You're taking something, you're absorbing something in your whole body.

And you can't just kind of get to the edge of the forest, take two steps in and pop out.

I did that.

Nothing happened.

You know, this is ridiculous.

I tried it and these people are fooling themselves.

You have to go in there and really take time.

Give yourself time for the forest bathing, to sink it in, absorb it, feel it, sense it.

Whatever, maybe it's a little bit mysterious, maybe because we can't measure all the different things that are affecting us.

So *vipassanā* is a little bit like that.

It's more like forest bathing than it is an engineering job, that you just learn the techniques, A, B, C, and D.

Vipassanā by the numbers.

Just follow the instructions.

Two steps in and you'll be done.

You're entering into a kind of world, you're entering into a forest, you're entering into some kind of space.

And you get maybe a little taste of that, stepping into IRC.

Many people when they first come are really affected by the ambience here and the feeling, the sense.

Something relaxes in many people.

Many people feel, never been here before, they feel at home, just walking in through the front door.

And if you've been here too many times, for too long, it kind of disappears.

But there's something here.

Many people have commented that kind of, maybe it's the wrong word, force field of a meditation home.

You know, you've been here long enough, you just come in and sit down and what's the big deal?

But we pull someone off the streets of Santa Cruz and have them walk in here, they're going to be blown away.

It's so quiet, it's so still, there's something here.

What is it?

So this is all a way of saying, we're entering a new world, and the usual ways in which we get things done and accomplish things is not the way here.

And so to engage in *vipassanā* practice is to shift, is to prepare yourself, is to open yourself, is to be willing to be changed.

Not by cause and effect, not by that you're going to huff and puff and make a change.

There's more going on in forest bathing.

There's more going on in *vipassanā* bathing than your efforts.

And I'll give you maybe one kind of hint to this.

Today's verse, today I'm going to talk about factor of awakening of strength, *vīriya*, and joy, *pīti*.

And closely associated to *vīriya* is the word for, another word for effort, like in the *Eightfold Path*, there's the right effort.

And some people, effort is a four-letter word that just sounds like just work, and work is not good, and you have to bear down and struggle, and it's a task you have to do and accomplish.

That's the old way.

That's what the old rules of the game.

There's a whole different thing about effort here.

And I want to encapsulate with the idea that's in the ancient teachings, that the effort, the *sammā-padhānas*, right effort, is beautiful.

Have you ever paired, put the adjective beautiful in front of effort?

Beautiful effort.

Probably very few have ever even thought of that.

But you might see a dancer put a lot of effort, a lot of energy into the dance.

But the dance is so elegant and beautiful.

I'll give you, it occurs to me, the story of a Zen master who taught here in Santa Cruz many years ago, Kobun Chino.

He was an archer, the way of archery.

And he went down to Esalen one day, and Esalen, if you've ever been, the retreat center, they have this big grass lawn that overlooks the cliff, overlooks the Pacific, vast Pacific off the cliff.

And he was going to do an archery demonstration.

And here again, you're entering a different world, not the world of cause and effect, not what you think is perfection.

And he, the people got, a big crowd of people got there on the lawn to watch him.

And he came out with his kind of archery skirt and clothes.

And he got himself ready and got everything carefully.

It's a whole production, kind of the art, like tea ceremony, the art of getting out the bow and getting out the arrow and getting ready and getting himself centered.

And what I imagined, I wasn't there, but what I imagined is just watching him.

The effort he made was so beautiful, so focused, so absorbed in what he was doing that it gathered people's attention.

People were right there with him.

And so then he pulled up the bow and he pulled up the arrow and he'd been a long time getting it lined up and aiming at the target and just took a long time breathing, centering himself.

And like, I imagine people are like on the edge of their seat, you know, and this was important, you know, to show how effective this kind of whole approach can be.

And the accuracy, the perfection of shooting the arrow with such preparation, such concentration present.

And after a while he shot the arrow, bullseye, right into the Pacific Ocean.

The target was not the point.

The point was not to hit the target.

The point was the whole process.

And, you know, it's a beautiful process.

So to pair beauty with effort, does that change how you're going to go about your effort?

So *vīriya* doesn't mean effort, but they're closely connected.

So we'll get to that.

So in these ancient teachings, they describe the *rasa*, the flavor of each of the seven factors of awakening and kind of how you kind of feel or know that it's really there.

And for *sati*, it's not forgetting, non-forgetfulness.

I think that's kind of brilliant.

So it's not being defined by what you do, but it's defined by what you don't do.

You're not forgetting.

And if you don't forget, then what?

Well then, what are you not forgetting?

You're not forgetting to be aware, to be here.

And if all you need is to not forget, then awareness is not so much a doing, but it's just a manifestation.

Maybe when you go forest bathing, you have to not forget you're in the forest.

You know, we have our iPhones with us and our iWatches and maybe other devices, and we don't forget those.

And so we might as well, walking down the forest path, you know, we've got to check on this and that.

Well, then the forest bathing doesn't work.

You have to not forget you're there.

Maybe if you focus on being here, there, maybe that doesn't have the same effect.

But if you don't forget you're there, then maybe you're more available, more open.

But if you try to focus on being there, then we tighten up, we narrow down, we try to do too much.

So don't forget to be aware.

So that's what the ancient texts say.

It says the flavor or the way you feel or sense *sati* is not forgetting.

And *dhammavicaya*, this investigation factor of awakening, its *rasa*, its flavor, taste, is illumination, illuminated.

There's a thing, the light's been turned on.

And there again, when the light is turned on in a room, you don't have to work so hard to see if you have good eyes.

But if it's almost no light at all, or if there's dark, I mean, then you have to kind of walk really carefully and make your senses, sometimes a lot more effort to walk in the dark for those who are not used to it.

And it might even be stressful and tense.

But the light goes on, something relaxes.

And the word, that's *dhammavicaya*.

Dhamma can mean here, not a thing, but a happening, an event, an action, an activity.

It's the functioning of something.

It's the activities or the activities, the functioning of the mind that is primarily what *dhamma* refers to.

And the *vi* part of *vicaya* means to separate.

And the *caya* part has been said to mean accumulate.

And this idea of accumulating, like accumulating the bundles, we kind of lump a lot of things together in our life.

A lot of ideas, concepts, identities, judgments about ourselves.

We kind of gather all this stuff.

And we gather our suffering, we gather attachments.

We kind of think in this big compound, vague idea of things.

And it's very hard to kind of understand what's happening when it's all gathered and lumped together.

So when the light gets turned on, what happens, what *vicaya* means, we're separating out the bundle.

We're separating out the accumulation.

What we're separating out is to start seeing the particular functionings of the mind, the activities of the mind-body, kind of how things are unfolding and moving.

It's been said, the famous saying, to see the *dhamma* is to see dependent arising, the activity of appearing.

To see dependent arising is to see the *dhamma*.

So here the *dhamma* is inseparable from action, activity, movement.

It's not a thing.

Nothing is a thing in *vipassanā* practice.

Everything is dynamic, nothing is static.

And so to begin seeing, because the light is on, not because we're straining, not because we're trying, what's the beautiful way of looking?

What's the way to be in awe of our capacity to perceive, to sense?

I mean, where did this come from that we should even have these abilities?

I mean, it's kind of like a miracle that we perceive anything at all.

To be aware, to see, to feel, to hear.

What if it's forest bathing in those...

Maybe it's not like trying to strain to hear better, strain to see better.

But what if just it's turning on the light and we start seeing.

And what we can see is that some of those activities of the mind, some of the things we do with our thoughts and our interests and our preferences, are unwholesome, maybe cause suffering, and some are wholesome.

Some are beautiful, and some are not so beautiful.

Some are healthy, and some are not so healthy.

So now we come to *vīriya*, the third of the factors of awakening.

And the word *vīriya*...

The most kind of, the most literal meaning is strength.

But it also can mean, it's related to the word for hero.

So sometimes, like in Tibetan Buddhism, I think they call it heroic strength, heroic effort or something.

But what's very interesting about the difference between strength and effort, effort is an endeavor to try to accomplish something.

Strength doesn't have to accomplish anything at all.

You can be strong without using your strength.

You can feel a sense of strength in your body, and it's kind of like forest bathing.

You kind of feel, oh, this feels good.

And so I like to think of *vīriya* as vitality, the energetics of vitality.

There's a certain kind of alive, or even just the word aliveness, what does aliveness feel like for you?

And does the sense of being alive, no matter how subtle it might be, does it have a different flavor, a different taste, than effort for you, whatever effort means for you?

And what I'm hoping is you get a sense that the sense of aliveness or vitality is something that's a little more suffusive.

It's something a little bit kind of almost built into our physical system.

If you sit quietly and especially if you take a good meditation posture.

That posture that somehow allows the flow of the *chi*, flow of the energy, flow of the vitality, where nothing is restricted or obstructed.

In these ancient teachings they talk about what the...

So the flavor, the taste of *vīriya* is support.

Something feels supported.

And another way, a place it's described as, it holds up.

It's what holds up.

So if you imagine in a healthy kind of state, you know, just, and you're really just sitting quietly or standing or lying down in a way that you really feel the movements of your vitality, the aliveness.

Maybe it's better to go run a marathon first, and then you sit down, and then just really coursing through you, maybe all the blood and everything.

But you don't have to do it.

You can be really sensitive and quiet and really tune in.

And so that it's a kind of, that hum, that energetics of it all, it says it's there to hold things up.

That's the language, hold up, to support.

Right?

And its manifestation, they say, it's manifested by non-collapse.

So I like to say sometimes that it's, you know, when people practice, there can be a lot of grief, a lot of sadness, a lot of crying.

And that this sitting and practicing is meant to be a place where our inner emotional life can finally surface.

But the one thing that's really helpful is, hold yourself up with it, in the middle of it.

Don't collapse.

Let it course through you, whatever feelings and emotions need to be.

Cry if you need to.

But don't collapse feeling sorry for yourself.

Don't kind of give up on yourself.

Keep the posture.

And that combination of complete permission, it's okay to feel whatever you're feeling, and a posture of vitality and openness that kind of is there to kind of hold it so we don't collapse.

That's *vīriya*.

What is it that holds the strength?

What offers us support?

A very interesting description of *vīriya* is that rather than thinking of *vīriya*, strength, as something that you do something with, the texts describe it as *vīriya* allows something to be born, something to arise.

So what is it that wants to be born?

What in this field of vitality, a field of aliveness?

What is its dynamic and moving?

What wants to surface and come?

That's a very different question.

That's a very different kind of game to play or life to live, culture to live in, than that of I'm going to do, I'm going to apply myself and make something happen and really, you know, break into a sweat, huff and puff.

I know this is unpleasant, but I know that you're not going to get anything good without suffering and pain.

No pain, no gain.

So I'm going to really, got to bear down here.

What if the saying is different?

What if the saying is, in the *dhamma*, no beauty, no gain.

No beauty, no arising.

No beauty, nothing beautiful comes.

So this idea of vitality, aliveness, this energy of support.

So with the second factor of awakening, we start seeing that some things are worth investing our vitality and some things are not.

Some of you have had the same thought repeatedly.

And maybe by now you see that thought is not so useful, maybe even good for you.

But you're so interested.

It's so important.

It's like so important or something.

Or, of course, you have to think about the resentment because, I don't know, resentments are...

It's like an issue of justice at stake.

And so you have to kind of be there over and over again.

But at some point, if you have this *dhammavicaya*, you have this light goes on, and say, wait a minute.

I keep feeding.

My vitality is going into this place that is actually draining my vitality.

Maybe I'll go where it enlivens the vitality.

And for *vipassanā* practitioners, it's very simple.

The alternative is to be awake, to be aware.

Come back to full awareness.

Let your vitality go into having a light on.

Let your vitality go into not forgetting.

And there's, with *dhammavicaya*, you see that choice point.

Not because you figured it out.

The light went on, and you see that, I don't know, you're hungry and you want to get food and there's no electricity.

So you go into your refrigerator and you know where the cheese is.

You take it out and you know where knives are.

You're getting it all ready in the dark.

And light goes on and then you see that the cheese is moldy.

It's like, oh, I guess I'm not eating this.

It's not like a big deal.

It's not like you had to figure it out.

You're not eating this.

So it's kind of that simple.

Oh, I'm not going to do this.

And so what they say in the ancient text is that what makes effort beautiful is because it doesn't have the non-beauty of being engaged in unwholesome things and things that cause suffering.

So there is a kind of distinction that happens in this *vipassanā* bathing that we're beginning to choose a place for our vitality, kind of where the light goes, where the light shines.

So then we come to the fourth factor of awakening, which is *pīti*, P-I-T-I, and I usually like to translate it as joy.

The ancient texts describe, say, its characteristic is a suffusive contentment.

I just love that.

Suffusive, I can't say it.

Suffusive contentment.

And contentment is also one of those unusual things.

That doesn't belong to the usual cause and effect world.

That's kind of closer to forest bathing.

Contentment bathing.

Wouldn't that be nice?

And it's clear that this suffusive contentment is in the body and in the mind.

It's what they describe.

It's a pervasive feeling.

So this vitality of *vīriya*, as it begins to flow freely, as it begins to flow freely into things that don't drain us, but enliven us or support us or is healthy for us, it carries with inside of it a kind of pleasure.

And sometimes *pīti* is described as pleasure, or translated as pleasure.

In later India, the word *pīti* was used to mean friendship.

It also came to be used as kind of one of the words for love.

So again, I'm saying this because I'm trying to convince you, if I may, because I'm still operating the old operating system, that there's another operating system that is not the usual cause and effect.

And so this *pīti*, there's too many people who think of it as this *jhānic* factor of concentration and it's supposed to be a certain kind of way and a lot of energy and all kinds of ideas people have of what *pīti* is.

They're not necessarily wrong, but it might overshoot, it might cause us, put people into the cause and effect world.

If I do X, if I really focus and get one-pointed and then I'll be filled with rapture, which might happen.

To help again convince you of, don't do this cause and effect thing, I've known people who could get really concentrated and have lots of rapture, and it didn't do them any good.

If anything, sometimes they actually got more conceited because they had this ability to...

What is it that does us good?

What feeds us?

What really allows for the deeper transformation?

What thaws us?

What softens our attachments and clings?

And so certainly *jhānas* are very important.

I don't want to dismiss them, but the fact that the ancient tradition associates *pīti* with suffusive contentment makes me very happy.

So again, contentment is something suffusive, is something...

Again, we're talking about a variety of our sense of aliveness, sense of vitality, something that's suffusive and present that doesn't lend itself to zeroing in a laser focus, being in the control tower and really trying to tease things apart.

It's part of this not forgetting to be aware, an awareness that's inclusive, that's available.

We're making yourself available more and more to be changed.

We make ourselves available for the parts of us that are frozen, too tensed up.

We're making ourselves available for the parts of us that are hard and closed and blocked off.

To start feeling safe, to start feeling safe enough, trusting enough to begin softening, relaxing, opening up.

We don't take a sledgehammer to the heart.

The warmth of contentment, the warmth of beauty allows the closed heart to open.

And so there is this, whatever *pīti* is, joy, contentment, delight, gladness.

In Pāli they have a lot of words.

We have a lot of words too in English, except for this kind of family of things, elation.

In Pāli it's kind of delightful that they have so many words.

And so as we practice with this wider field, this kind of settled contentment, there's something about the mindfulness, the engagement, the knowing, the sensing, being connected, the flow, the rhythm of being present and feeling and being with the breath, being with our experience, and that of continuity, of riding the experience, riding the upwelling of vitality, riding the movements of breath, the sensations that come and go, of kind of not zeroing in, but kind of receiving it, kind of allowing it.

That it becomes, as some of you heard me talk about, it becomes a little bit like petting the cat.

That if you take your finger and poke at the cat, expecting it to purr, it'll probably get up and leave, or worse.

And you don't pet the cat in the opposite direction from their hair.

That doesn't...

You have to go with the grain, to be in harmony with the way the hair is, just to do it very lightly, and the cat begins to purr.

There's something like that that happens to our inner system.

We begin to purr.

We begin feeling a certain kind of, oh, this is nice, it's good.

It's nice to be present, it's nice to be aware.

It's nice to really ride the inhale.

It's nice to kind of be there for the exhale, not narrowly focusing on it, but maybe it's more like breath bathing, feeling both the goodness, like you're being stroked, like you're being petted almost with the breath.

Some teachers talk about seeing the sweetness, feeling the sweetness of breath or the beauty of breathing, of a beautiful breath.

Or if the breath isn't beauty, maybe the beauty of how you're aware of the breath.

It's possible to be aware of the breath calmly.

It's possible to be aware of the breath without an agenda.

It's possible to be aware of breathing with generosity, with compassion, with appreciation, with gratitude, with some kind of attitude that brings a kind of contentment or delight or happiness.

And a lot of it has to do with the quality, the characteristics of how we're aware.

And then we're awareness bathing.

I keep using this expression because we have to kind of make ourselves available to feel and sense and be in the field, in the goodness of it for a while.

There's no, you can't hurry this process.

So, *sati*, mindfulness, involves not forgetting, not forgetting to be aware, where awareness is more like a field, more like a sense of presence or attending, being there with all of yourself.

Investigation is when that non-forgetting is like turning on the light.

So you are present, you're here, so that what's here can be revealed or seen clearly.

And that's not easy to be here, because sometimes the mind is anywhere but here.

But when the mind starts to be here, when we settle and start appreciating that, okay, now I've arrived, my mind is not going into the past anymore, the future anymore, I'm here.

Then we say the light is on, because we're here to see and view it.

And then we can, in that light on, in the present moment, it's only in the present moment that you can feel your vitality, feel your strength, feel your aliveness.

And if that aliveness feels kind of good, it feels good to be present and alive and here, it gives you a phenomenally important vantage point to see how you lose that, how you get caught up again in thoughts and ideas and you're no longer present.

How you get reactive, how you fuel the reactivity with thinking of it over and over and over again or ruminating about it or being attached to something or resisting something.

And you can start feeling the diminishment, the draining away of something.

It's not wrong to do that.

You're not a bad person because you're doing that.

The idea is just, oh look at that.

Isn't that amazing?

There's a wonderful way that there's a number of places where some, in the ancient texts, where some monk is meditating and the monk's having a really hard time, like the hindrances are really big for the monk.

And the monk exclaims, it's amazing, it's amazing to have so many hindrances.

I just love it.

By the way, it's amazing as opposed to, oh no, not again.

Oh no, I'm a failure.

It's like, oh, look at this, it's amazing.

Oh, and it's healthier to be amazed than it is to be discouraged.

So where does your vitality go?

And if your vitality is allowed to flow into what is healthy, what is good, not because you're making good, but you're recognizing and allowing the good, the healthy to be there, choosing it in a sense over what is draining, maybe...

If you allow yourself to be *vipassanā* bathing, just maybe something like purring will happen.

And for each of you, the purr will be felt differently.

Maybe it won't be like a cat at all.

But some kind of contentment, some kind of delight, some kind of feeling of rightness, some kind of feeling of bright aliveness, some kind of feeling of relief.

Ah, I'm here.

This is good to be here this way.

No longer fighting my experience, resisting it, no longer judging it, reacting to it.

Just here with it.

So, we live in two worlds.

The world that exists where we're not aware.

And the world we live in when we are aware.

We live in two bodies.

The body we have when we're not aware.

And the body we have when we are aware.

The light turns on.

We have two kinds of emotions, those which are there when we're aware and those that we're not aware.

It makes such a huge difference how you're to be aware, in the middle of it, whatever it might be.

And may it be that you take the kind of journey or take the trust to enter this new world that operates very differently than the cause and effect world, that you allow yourself to be nourished.

You allow yourself to be really settled and present.

You allow yourself to be available, to be changed, to be nourished, to be influenced, as you do the, as you walk, as you do this practice, as a form of *vipassanā* bathing.

May the goodness of this practice nourish you, delight you, guide you, and free you.