

Equanimity Factor of Awakening

Gil Fronsdal

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So the factor of awakening for today is equanimity.

The seven factors of awakening are mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. And they are presented in a kind of sequence where the mind is getting stiller, quieter, less active, less reactive. If you want to thread a needle, you have to keep your hand still. If you have the needle on the other hand, both hands have to be still. And when they're both really just still, just long enough for you, you think you know you can get the thread through the needle hole. But if your hand is shaky, it's going to be pretty hard, and it's just a matter of luck whether you get it through.

I've been told a story about a Japanese Zen monk who came to America, who had, you know, some important role for establishing some of Buddhism here in California, Northern California. His name is Kobun Chino. And when he was in Japan, he studied the way of archery. And so one day he was down at Esalen and he was going to do a demonstration of Zen archery. And so here was a Zen master with his capacity for focused attention.

In Zen, there's a lot of practice with your body, how you hold your body, how you sit, how you walk. And so he had a special kind of outfit that Zen archers, way-of-archers wear, kind of a kind of a skirt, black skirt. I don't know what else he was wearing, a kind of formal attire. And he was there at the big lawn over the cliffs of the Pacific, and on this lawn he was going to demonstrate, and he came up and apparently walked up in a very meditative way. And even the way he walked, his attention, his poise, his care, the fact that he was really there in the walk, captivated people's attention.

And he stood there and pulled on, like the Japanese tea ceremony, perhaps very beautifully pulled out his bow, his arrow, got everything ready, and just precise, and got himself into position. It took a long time to get his balance, poise. And it's like threading the needle if you

really want to be accurate. In archery, you know, it might be a long distance the arrow has to go. So you have to be really still. And if you really want to be still too, you have to also have a very still mind, peaceful, quiet.

Be able to not worry, What are people thinking? And to pay my taxes and what's for dinner. Just very, very still, present, like everything gets reduced to just this event of the moment. Imagine his mind travelled out the end of the spear point, looking out at the target, and he was poised there getting ready, focused, attentive, still with all these people watching, borrowing or captivated by his attention, by his poise, his focus, his equipoise. And apparently it was a long kind of still silence, pause, kind of pregnant pause, everyone waiting, What's going to happen, what's going to happen.

And finally he let loose the arrow. It must have been a relief to feel the arrow go through space. All attention went to perfect bull's eye, right into the Pacific Ocean. That's where it is. That's what he was aiming at. That's what he was aiming for.

So we practise maybe not to look like a Zen archer, but to somehow bring our system into balance, into a poise, into a kind of stillness that's certainly not falling asleep. He wasn't sleeping. But where the mind is not so active, it's not reactive, it's not agitated. The mind that's agitated won't go through the eye of the needle. The eye that's that agitated will just keep kind of wavering.

And imagine that there's just a little door to go through, a crack in the wall, just big enough for you. But if you were racing back and forth looking for it, you keep missing it. You have to slow down and slow down. The empty analogy I like is that of a ball. I suppose I took my sons to one of these discovery museums they have. Many of them had this big bowl, and you'd put like a marble at the top and let it fall into the bowl, and it would go up and down and around this big bowl.

But over time it would lose, and sometimes there was a hole at the bottom of the bowl. And now, because of the momentum, usually the marble would just sail right over, go up and down around, come back to the hole, and sail right over. And then, as the momentum quieted down, quieted down, slowed down, at some point it was slow enough that when it came to the bottom of the bowl, where normally the bottom of a bowl is where something would rest if it came to a stop, when it came down to the place where it could rest, the marble would just fall through into the vast Pacific Ocean. And I love this idea that the aim, the target, whatever of practice is really big, is vast. The freedom, the peace of the mind, the space of the mind, but to touch it, to become it, to let go into it, it does require the mind to be quiet and still, non reactive, unagitated.

And so one of the functions of this *vipassanā* practice and concentration practice is to learn to trust, to appreciate the life as it is, just being rather than doing, because in the doing, it's too easy for the marble, your marbles just keep going. But to be able to just slow everything, kind of not necessarily slow down, because I don't want to say this as dulling. It's more like non agitation, no more any agitation at all, no more for something or against anything in the activity of the mind. You could, in principle, have things you don't like or like. But in the moment of moment here, the mind is not inclined to lean towards anything, pull away from anything, poke at anything.

Not pulling out the tool kit in order to kind of adjust the screws, your loose screws. Just sit, just so. An autonomous mind is a mind that's unagitated, but not just unagitated, because that's kind of like a tranquil mind as well. But it's a mind that's clear, and has a certain strength, a feeling of strength in it, where it just doesn't, is not pushed around, doesn't waver, doesn't get activated by whatever happens. And some people, when they hear how much equanimity is emphasized, will kind of feel like it's proof that these Buddhists are party poopers.

You know that? Just to, you know, just to, once again, kind of emphasizing your non reactivity, or not doing, or just kind of. But it's really a dynamic state, but very still, like the archer on Esalen lawn mind. Imagine that the reason the audience was so captivated by his stillness was it was not just stillness. It was just, you know, there were plenty of people who lay on that lawn, sunbathing. But there was something about his attention, his clarity, and it really got people.

So we all have that capacity. It's kind of an innate capacity, because it's kind of putting to rest all the things which are not innate, all the kind of business of the mind, wanting of the mind, doing of the mind, letting that all shed and quiet. But it's not an easy thing to come to. So with these seven factors of awakening, it's kind of interesting that the more we go along with the seven, the more what they're describing are things that are the result of practice, not the practice we put in. We put in place conditions so certain things can occur or that they may occur.

We don't engineer it so that we're not in charge, we're not making it happen. And when we get to this deep equanimity, it's very important not to get involved in tinkering and being the one who's going to make something and do something and I'm responsible and it's up to me. And this whole, you know, taking control or responsibility has a place in life. But as we settle in meditation, it's one of the great places to experience or find or know the place where we don't take so much responsibility or we don't. We're not the ones who are doing

and making.

We're the ones who put in place conditions. So the first condition is putting in place mindfulness. So we have to have some role to be mindful, and we practise it, and practise it, and come back and do it again. Investigation maybe a little bit also can be kind of doing, can look at this more carefully. Effort maybe can be considered kind of doing. You're plying yourself.

You are falling asleep and you keep waking up the best you can. You try again and make effort. And then those are the active parts of practice. And then, beginning with joy, it begins to aversion into not the active but rather the receptive aspects of practice, those aspects that arise because the conditions are in place and we're receptive, we have room in the mind for them to arise. And it's one of the reasons why this receptive attention that Paul talks about is so important, because without being receptive in the awareness, you're in danger of not having any room for other things to happen in there.

You've filled up the vent with the doings that we do. And so the mindfulness, the deeper connection and contact and investigation and the effort is that it puts together a kind of conditions where things begin to shift. And I think that I think all of you, I know all of you, have shifted in the days that you've been here much more than you realize, and I've known plenty of people, including myself, who left retreats, for example, thinking there was nothing happened until I try to talk, and I note, like, or get in the car and something, and, you know, just being here in this kind of environment, it's a condition for settling and calming.

So then the joy transitions into tranquillity. It's a kind of joy that supports us to feel safe, feel like things are good, kind of an emotional fulfilment that allows us to say, I can just be here, which, that relaxation, is the condition for a healthy kind of concentration, which is often forgotten by some people who really feel, I need to get concentrated. And they get concentrated tensely, where really the productive, useful, healthy concentration, it isn't so much something we do as it's more like we allow for it, and relaxation is necessary for that. And then with concentration, there comes, there can arise, the result of that, when that's settled, deepening, is equanimity. And equanimity then is that steadiness, non reactivity of the mind that will allow you to have a bull's eye on the Pacific Ocean.

The target's pretty big, but you have to have that steadiness for the ball to get to the bottom and slow down, to plump through. So in terms of the seven factors of awakening, equanimity isn't necessarily something that we practise in daily life. We can do that, and it has its role. But we're focusing on a kind of deep steadiness, deep non reactivity that can happen as we allow this process to come to some kind of maturity. So as equanimity is kind of a resultant of

conditions, I thought I'd talk about seven conditions that support the arising of equanimity, or the presence of equanimity, a little bit at least in my mind.

As I go through these seven, it's a little bit of a journey, a journey home, a journey deeper inside, a journey to what's more essential. So the first of the seven that supports equanimity is *sīla*, is our ethical behaviour, to live a life of integrity, of ethics. If we have confidence that we don't intentionally harm people, then we have the bliss of blamelessness. We know that no one has any grounds to criticize us, and we know there's no grounds for us to feel bad about ourselves. And so people can say all kinds of things to us, but we know for ourselves, No, my ethics is good.

And that allows for a certain kind of equanimity. People who spend a lot of time doing unethical things tend to be agitated. They're worried about getting caught, being known, trying to figure out the next lie to cover it over, trying to get the next thing they're trying to get because whatever the unethical things they're doing. So the equanimity that comes from being ethical.

The second is the equanimity from faith. People who have a lot of faith in, they tend to be much more resilient in life. They tend not to be pushed around so much because they have something they trust that's going to take care of them or support them. And one of the great things that we have trust in or confidence in, people who do *vipassanā*, is in the practice of mindfulness itself, to learn that, you know, whatever happens, it's workable. Whatever happens, you know, I can work with it somehow because I have mindfulness.

I have a mindfulness practice that can help me look at my every activity, look at what's happening, learn to be present for it. And generally, things work out in some kind of good way if we're present in a mindful way. It doesn't necessarily mean that you're driving on the freeway, you see you're running out of gas, No, I'll just trust mindfulness. And, you know, you still run out of gas and have to pull over the side of the road. But, you know, I'll trust mindfulness.

Let me be lucky. Let's pay attention here. Let's look around. See what's going on, and then maybe something will happen. If nothing else, you won't get agitated. You won't make it into more problem than it is.

So to have trust, to have trust in the Buddha, *Dharma*, the *Saṅgha*, to have trust in the path of practice, to have trust in the goal of practice, to have something that we really have confidence in and faith in, and so that no matter what the difficulties of life might arise, you know, I have this. I have this. This will support me, this will see me through. This will make it work.

I've known people who have come to retreat.

They've told me, you know, the last month or so has been difficult, but I knew I was coming to retreat, so that kind of, you know, I could manage. Then I got to stay grounded and settled because I knew that was going to be a place that was going to kind of help take care of me or help me find my way. So the equanimity that comes from having faith or confidence.

The third kind, the third support for equanimity, is a well developed mind. You know, people can have well developed bodies, and go to the gym, and work out a lot, and, you know, that allows you to do all kinds of things, gives people a certain kind of confidence to have, be physically strong, to stand there and be present, and feel a certain kind of strength coursing through the body. It allows for, you know, a lot of stability. When people get older, going to the gym is not to be bad. It's just so that they don't fall over. They want some stability.

They want to be able to just, you know, hold their ground. So the same thing with the mind, that we can cultivate and strengthen the mind like there's muscles in there. There is a muscle of mindfulness, a muscle of concentration, a muscle of compassion, a muscle of investigation. All these capacities we have. They're called faculties. There's a muscle of faith.

All these are our capacities. They can get stronger until the Buddha calls them, they can become powers. And he talked about cultivating these, the well developed mind, especially powers in the mind, powers of faith, powers of effort, powers of mindfulness, of concentration, and then of wisdom. And that, you know, just if you do the practice, you know, do the practice, show up, wake up moment after moment, you're cultivating, you're strengthening the mind. And I love this teaching by Suzuki Roshi, who said something like, Don't start practicing when you're in the middle of a crisis.

You practise way before the crisis, so that you build the strength of the mind, stability of the mind. You develop the skills of attention and focus and letting go, so that when the crisis comes, they're handy and they can be useful. So we develop the mind.

The fourth quality that supports equanimity is a well being of mind, some kind of a feeling of a wellness feeling. I am, a goodness, happiness, joy, delight, contentment. And Buddha put a lot of emphasis on these qualities that are important supports of practice. And some of that we can, we can't make it happen. But these are things that conditions can support them. For example, a condition for enjoying, you know, a flock of birds flying across the great blue sky, just looking up and watching, there can be a kind of delight to see that.

A condition for doing that is not racing through websites trying to get through all the emails quickly. All this business and inactivity people do, or not to be always thinking about plan-

ning and remembering and kind of caught up in the claustrophobic mind. But to take the time to stop and just enjoy. Look around. There tends to be a lot more beauty and enjoyment in this world than we avail ourselves of.

If we are always preoccupied, we don't avail ourselves of what's here. We're preoccupied, more often than not, human beings. So to slow down and take time, to like take time for this certain modicum of well being to be here, to look for contentment. And what does contentment mean? And what's healthy contentment? What's healthy discontent?

But when the mind feels happy, it's much more resilient. It's much less likely to get agitated or reactive to what's going on. It's like, between concentration, developing the mind to be concentrated, and well being, it's kind of like there's lots of room. The mind becomes spacious. And, you know, someone says something about your grandmother's army boots, and you're all claustrophobic already. It's like, This is a big deal, big insult.

But someone says something about your grandmother's army boots, and like, just, Well, that's an anachronism, you know. That's weird, you know. It goes, well, it just goes, doesn't land anywhere. So the idea of us being supported by happiness and well being and joy, contentment, is a condition for equanimity.

And then the fifth condition for equanimity is wisdom: to have some understanding of what's going on, and the word *upekkhā* for equanimity literally can, etymologically, mean to have an overview of a situation, to have a bird's eye picture, a bird's eye view of the situation, rather than get caught up in the little details of the moment and lose sight of the big picture. So to be able to kind of step back and have the presence of mind to kind of look at the big picture of what's going on here, what's happening. You know, you're in the dining room, and you've got a plateful of maybe, you know, it's giddy with lots of tomato sauce, and right there, smack in the middle of the dining room, you drop your plate and crash, tomato sauce everywhere on the floor. So that's a time where you might lose the big picture. But I've seen something like that happen here, and I've seen people not get ruffled.

I've seen people see the plate, things are a peaceful moment, and they go get what they need to do to clean it up. Usually someone helps them out, unruffled and maybe unembarrassed. At least it looks like that when I've seen it. An overview is a big picture that would support that in this context. Being in a community of kind people, non reactive people who give each other space. Being in a place where the practice is to take time to see the mind.

The practice is not to get caught up and reactive. Maybe that's that kind of, that's maybe a bigger picture. Oh look, here I can have a different way, where before I would have been

embarrassed, and I can have some degree of equanimity. So there's a whole slough of wisdom or understandings that we can carry with us and learn over a lifetime of practice that supports us in all kinds of situations. Understanding and wisdom about other people, about ourselves, and some of you have that.

If you come on retreat, you come on retreat many times, you have the wisdom that, Oh, this is what happens on retreat. The first day, someone's first time on retreat, the first day is maybe gruelingly painful, and, What was I thinking? I'm going to sue them for false advertisement. And the second day, that falls away, maybe. And by the afternoon of the second day, maybe it's gotten quieter, peaceful, and kind of content.

And then it's like, Oh my God, I'll get all my family and friends to come next time, because this is the best. And then the third day, all this unresolved grief comes welling up. There is something, and, How, what is crazy? I shouldn't be here. And then the fourth day it's some calm. That's nice.

And then the next day there's, you know, you get the idea, it goes up and down, up and down. And the first retreat, each of these big things gets a big deal. Oh my, this is horrible. This is great. Wonderful. I have it made. I'll never be depressed ever again. I got the *samādhi*. This is it, you know. Yes, but don't anyone breathe because I have to keep it.

But as people do multiple retreats, slowly they realize, Wait a minute, I'm always tired, achy the first day. It's just a first day experience. And I usually have a kind of a baseline kind of well being the second day. It's just a second day. I don't have to write home about it. And then the third day, my knees hurt.

That usually happens on the third day, so I'll just, kind of, okay. So having the overview that these things come and they go, and this is what's to be expected, can let the mind, allow the mind, not to get reactive, agitated. So wisdom, understanding, familiarity with certain things can help equanimity.

The sixth support for equanimity is insight, and the insight of insight meditation is, at the heart of it, seeing the inconstancy of life, the constant changing quality of things, the comings and goings of phenomena. And the deeper we settle into the present moment, the less we overlay the present moment with our ideas of what is, the more we see that it actually sparkles. It comes and goes and rises and passes. It's fascinating to see how much our concepts are projected or overlaid on top of all things going on. In fact, the idea that anything is constant or permanent is a kind of projection of the mind.

The conceptual mind is making it that way or seeing it that way, and to let that conceptual

mind get quiet, and to be in the perceptual field of things coming and going. Inconstancy, for some people, produces a very profound equanimity, partly because it doesn't make any sense any more to reach for it or to want it to be one way or the other, to have preferences, to try to stop the flow, try to encourage the flow. Just phenomena, just selflessly moving through. It's all selfless. It's phenomena. To see the impermanent flow of all things is a selfless flow.

It's just phenomena, the movements of the universe through us. And then the last support for equanimity is freedom, is release. If you are, you know, if as long as we're holding on to something, we tighten up and contract. There's a fragility. There's something which is holding and doing. But if we can let go.

So if I make my fist analogy again, if I make my fist really hard and hold it up like this for a long time, initially it feels strong and steady, and I'm going to keep it up. But then, over time, it gets weaker and shakier, and someone comes along and hits it, and all kinds of things can happen to it. But then I come along with my wonderful mindfulness, and I support it, and then, as it feels supported, then it kind of releases, relaxes, and then it puts itself down, and it's completely released, and that arm and that fist now have no reactivity, no agitation, no preferences any more, just it's come to rest.

So the mind also needs to be able to let go deeply of our preoccupations about self and self image, and preoccupation with shoulds and shouldn'ts, and ideas of what it means to be a good person, ideas of success, failure, to be able to bring that wonderful palm of mindfulness underneath all those preoccupations, and let them rest, and let go of them. And if they can let go, we release them. Then the mind won't be reactive, at least in regard to those things.

So in Buddhism, we begin with ethics, evoke a healthy kind of faith or confidence, create the conditions. Do take the time and the conditions that develop the mind and bring a sense of well being, and then pay enough attention to what's going on that you start having some wisdom about it, understanding about it. And that comes with time, comes with practice. And then, as the mind gets more able to stay in the, you know, really grounded in the present moment, there's the kind of surfing in a balanced way on the flow of inconstant phenomena. And then there's release, letting go.

Yes, yielding yourself to the Pacific Ocean, yielding yourself into the eye of the needle, yielding yourself or allowing yourself or giving yourself over, getting out of the way. And so equanimity is a wonderful quality of mind, kind of considered the crown jewel of Buddhist, kind of Buddhist emotional states. And now, so it's a kind of an ideal, and an important way to work with Buddhist ideals is don't go for it directly, but rather notice what keeps you from

the ideal. Notice what gets in the way of the ideal. And then practise with that, work with that, to work through that and work with that enough.

Be present for it and practise with it enough so that it's no longer an obstacle. And that brings a number of benefits. One of them is that you're not forcing yourself into something that you shouldn't be. And maybe it's the wrong time to be an equanimous, if you have somebody else, supposed to be equanimous. Also, it might be in other ways that something else is better in the circumstance than equanimity.

And if you let go the obstacles, then you are more likely to be able to be available to that other thing that's there. And also then you get the benefit that you really feel that the equanimity that arises is a result of conditions, and you can't take responsibility for it. It's a gift. And this idea that we sit here breathing, doing walking meditation, being present, being mindful, and seeing all of it as a gift, it's a very different feeling than seeing it all as, I got to do it, I have to do better, and have to do more, I have to work harder. It's a gift.

Well, so my, how did I get to have any conscience at all? How did this happen? I didn't sign up for it. I didn't ask for it. I don't even know what conscience is, but I got it, pretty cool. A gift to view a moment of mindfulness as a gift, as opposed to, I mindfulness, I got that one.

Then whatever comes, whatever subtleness, whatever presence, whatever goodness that comes from the practice, to view it as a gift, and to be available for the gift of life, to be available, to see it all, even the difficulties, as a gift, and that availability to it, that willingness to, kind of, receptivity to it, is part of the treasure, even if it's not really a gift. To open up and receive or appreciate it in that way is one of the conditions that allows the mind to be non reactive, to not be caught up, not be making and doing and wanting.

So we sit here and, within our limited means, we sit here and allow ourselves to have moments of quiet, so these gifts that we have of attention, awareness, presence can show itself. We allow some modicum of quiet in the mind, so we might discover what else can arise in the space that has been cleared. If the mind is full of thoughts, not much can come. What gifts are waiting that are ready to come? There just needs space for them to come, quiet, reactive, autonomous space where you're willing to take whatever comes.