

7 Factors: Samadhi

Gil Fronsdal

January 30, 2026

Keywords: nibbāna, dhamma, Nikāyas, upasama, samādhi, sati, vīriya, nimitta, five hindrances, seven factors of awakening

As I said earlier, I believe that when we enter into Dharma practice, it's helpful to understand that we're entering into a different process or different principles of life, a different orientation than we usually do in life, usually are in our society and how we're trained. And the usual notions of cause and effect, causality, don't quite play out in the Dharma. But if you use your usual understandings of cause and effect, and the doer and the results of your doing, you make it harder for yourself. So one kind of standard way of understanding is, you know, if you do X, you'll get Y. Or if you travel down a road, you'll get to the end of the road. And the goal is to get to the end of the road.

Some famous dancer said something like, the choreographer said something like, the goal of the dance is not to get to the end of the dance. The goal of the dance is to dance. And so the same in the Dharma practice. There is a goal. That's often emphasized, sometimes ignored.

It's sometimes called *nibbāna*, a word that probably the best, one of the best interpretive translations is release, profound release, profound letting go. And the idea would be like, this is like a grand thing. It's a super practitioners maybe have a chance for this exalted state far in the future. And of course, the way there is to follow the path. Buddhism calls it a path after all, so that's reasonable. And if I just walk that path far enough, you know, maybe I'll reach the end of it.

That's the goal. So that's kind of a little bit, I think, the ordinary way of thinking. But in the Dharma, there's a very different way of thinking. And that is that the goal is found in the means. The goal is found in each step. Maybe this is a silly example, but if one of the goals of walking is to free yourself from gravity enough that you can take a step, you're successful then with that freedom with every step.

Isn't that nice? Mostly we focus on getting somewhere and we don't notice this phenomenal thing that there's a force pulling us downward, holding us in place. Right? And we somehow, amazingly, if we have good legs, we can free ourselves from that force. So it's so mundane and so ordinary, it's almost, you know, ridiculous to say it that way. But in every little moment, ridiculously small moment of practicing mindfulness, there is a way of understanding that the goal is found right there.

To be mindful, to be, or have clarity of mindfulness, clarity of awareness, like to really be present fully for this experience. Even if the smallest one, most insignificant little experience, doesn't matter. To have that presence of attention in that moment, there's freedom from preoccupation, freedom from what keeps us from clearly seeing. And we learn through this practice, there's a lot of things that keep us from seeing clearly. There's a lot of forces in the mind that keep us preoccupied and caught in our views and ideas and our disappointments, such as discouragements, or, you know, all the ideas that things are not right, or things should be better, or there's an attainment out there to get.

Those are all things that there is no freedom. But if all those can just kind of settle for one second... Can we hope for half a second, maybe? And have instead just be mindful. It's like that step becoming free of gravity. The foot becomes free of gravity. That moment there's a kind of release.

But it's so insignificant. It's so, doesn't it, have any monetary value. And it's not going to give you worldwide fame. So it can't be, you know. But if you reach the *nibbāna*, the Big Bang *nibbāna*, then maybe you've hoped for a world of white fame. Then people come and give you bouquets and bouquets of flowers.

It'll be great. But then we miss, this is the radical shift, is to shift into this present moment experience, putting aside the ordinary cause and effect and finding right here in the moment the goal, the practice itself. And that way, every moment of mindfulness is complete. Every moment of mindfulness is satisfying, is meaningful. You wouldn't then occur to you, well, that was a lousy moment to be mindful.

That was a, you know, that wish I hadn't spent any time being mindful there because I could have been distracted on a nice thought. Yeah. The idea is that in that moment of mindfulness, to feel that release, to feel like now, for this half second, there, I'm here. And some people find it very helpful to do the mental noting for that purpose. Just a very simple, weightless word. No stress, no tension in the word and the saying of the word.

But this clarity in breath... There's just an inhale, just that exhale. It's kind of like acknowledg-

ing or participating with that half a second of just mindful justness. So this principle of not holding on, not clinging, not grabbing, not finding and looking for the release can happen in all the little moments of practice. And that's where we're supposed to find it. And then as we find it there and appreciate it there, it begins to grow.

Something grows and has a chance to develop, oh, this is good. It grows and grows and grows. And it grows into *nibbāna*. One of the, I think, one of the not so helpful views is that little bit magical thinking, that there's some big bang experience, and you'll be happy ever after. You're waiting for that experience.

The more you're growing into it, you're growing into the fullness, you're becoming thorough, complete in the freedom that starts with small steps. And where does that small step start? Wherever you are at that moment. And they can start just with an act of mindfulness. This, this.

So I want to read you one of my favorite professors of *Pāli* Theravādan Studies, a man named Rupert Gethin, in a little bit more kind of academic language. But it's only maybe, just so you don't steel yourself for it, it's only two sentences. But one is really long. So he refers to the *Nikāyas*. *Nikāyas* are the books that contain all the Buddhist teachings.

For the *Nikāyas*, there is an essential unity to progress along the path. For the principles that underlie the workings of the mind are always the same. The principles that underlie the workings of the mind are always the same, whether we are talking of ordinary concentration, ordinary steadiness of mind, or the full knowledge of the destruction of taints, that's *nibbāna*. So the workings of the mind are always the same, whether an ordinary moment of concentration or the fullness of *nibbāna*. That is to be seen simply that this is so, is seen simply as the nature of things. In short, it is the *dhamma*.

So it's another way, his way of saying that, you know, the goal is found in the means, because we're talking about the same process all along the way. It's not like a new special process is going to happen at the end of the path. It's just that the simple process of letting go, being present without clinging, just grows and grows. And it helps if we appreciate it, if we understand that's what we're doing. And so even the beginning of this Seven Factors of Awakening, beginning with the awareness factor of awakening, it says not forgetting.

To not forget is a little movement or big movement of letting go, of not forgetting, but we're letting go of the distractions that cause us to forget. So we remember. And not that remember is a mental activity, but is the remembering back into the fullness, the wholeness of here.

The yesterday's factor of awakening, tranquility, is associated with stillness. *Upasama*, sometimes translated as peace, as stilling, quieting, peacefulness.

And the food, I think the Buddha says that the nutriment that supports the growth of this tranquility is to recognize tranquility. So by the time you've gone into practice for a few days and gone through the first factors of awakening, get to tranquility, there's some hope that we are in fact a little bit tranquil, a little bit calmer than usual. And then the idea is not to look beyond it for some great thing to happen. But the idea is, again, always come back here with what's here. But the instructions are, if you want more tranquility, if you want it to grow, take time to feel it, to know it.

That's the nutriment for the tranquility to grow. You don't huff and puff and build and get your hammers and nails out to make a really good tranquil state of mind, banging away. That's not the way you need to make tranquility. But to tune into what's already here, and as some of you might have noticed, sometimes in this meditation hall, it feels very still. And the chances are high that that stillness is here, even when you're so preoccupied and agitated that you don't actually feel it.

We can get caught and lost in our own agitation and our own preoccupation. Some people at some point will find that remember tranquility, stillness, peace. And right there, there is a kind of release. Right there, there's some degree of letting go, of being present in a way. It's not, again, doesn't have to be dramatic.

And then we come to the *samādhi* and factor of awakening of *samādhi*. And I have given myself intense headaches from trying to concentrate. I have dug myself a grave by working and trying to get concentrated. And I was so persistent that the worse it got, the less I got concentrated, the more I tried. You know, and the more I tried, the less I could get concentrated.

So the solution is to try harder. Not knowing that the harder I tried would just make it harder. So I just tried harder until, so, you know, I just collapsed. I just, like... It was impossible.

And the one time, the first time that really happened dramatically for me, it was a feeling that I just reached rock bottom. And I felt like I could, I gave up. I just, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't do it anymore. And I had no idea what I was supposed to do sitting there on the retreat.

Just I just, I give up. And that's when the retreat began. Only then did something different begin to have room to grow and develop and open for me. As long as I was the agent, which is the old operating system, as long as I was the agent of the doing, in this kind of intense way, I was just making it harder and harder for myself. So with *samādhi*, that's a beautiful thing.

It's a beautiful state. But so are all the seven factors of awakening. They're characterized by beauty. And it's very hard, I believe, to appropriate beauty, to cling to beauty. I mean, you cling to your idea of beauty, but when you see something really beautiful, the aesthetic experience of beauty is not exactly something you can hold or grab.

It's kind of like grabbing air with your fist, your fingers. Beauty, it doesn't lend itself. Beauty is not a... Maybe beauty is not a thing. Maybe beauty is not a thing. Maybe beauty doesn't reside in the so-called object of beauty.

So we have these beautiful things that we experience. And I emphasize it so that, again, there's a different orientation. Where's the beauty? How is it beautiful? How do I do it beautifully? How do I make beautiful effort?

How do I make effort that in the effort itself there is part of the goal? How do I make the effort so in the effort itself, there is some freedom, some release? So in terms of *samādhi*, and some of the ways that *samādhi* is described in the ancient texts, just like *sati* is described by not forgetting, the first description, the characteristic of *samādhi* is non-disturbance. The mind is not disturbed. And I love that as a description of *samādhi*, because then *samādhi* is not a thing.

When *samādhi* is something to clearly define the idea, this is what it is, then it's easy to get locked into it or attached to it. But you can get attached to the idea of non-disturbance, but non-disturbance is not a thing. It's an absence of something. And so, and what is there in the absence of it? It could be many things.

There are many *samādhis*. It doesn't have to be one particular way, the *samādhi*. Some people say it's the natural mind, the mind that's undisturbed. It's sometimes also described as the mind that's not scattered. And many minds are very scattered, divided, caught up in many concerns and activities, thoughts and ideas, spinning.

We say in English we talk about spinning mind or agitated mind, scattered mind, into a non-scattered mind. So I love it when there's these non-words. I feel like it's so generous because then we get to just enjoy what's left, what's there instead, without again building up or making it anything. So non-scattered mind, the tradition does describe that sometimes as being a collected mind, a stable mind, a steadied mind, a unified mind. The word *samādhi*, more appropriately, means a collected mind, a gathered mind, a unified mind.

So, but how does it get unified? By not being scattered. Then it finds itself unified. And, but there's such wonderful this thing, this word unified. One image I have of it is all the puzzle

pieces coming together, and you have something gathered and clicking together and everything fits.

Another idea of a unified mind is a mind that is so expansive, the sense of awareness is so big that everything is contained within it. And sometimes that feels the freest. Nothing has to be any different. Nothing has to come together and click into, you know, the puzzle. But it's just everything.

There's space for everything. Everything's held and collected in this wide, open, spacious mind. But sometimes this idea of gathering together, coming together is also very good. And sometimes the idea of a steadied mind, a settled mind, is used a lot in the *suttas*. So again, in the *suttas*, they talk about this nourishment, nutriment for *samādhi*.

And the nutriment of *samādhi* is the... It's what's something called the *nimitta*, the *nimitta* of *samādhi*. And in the modern Theravāda, *nimitta* has become a very narrow idea, associated with particular schools of meditation. But in the ancient text, *nimitta* was any sensation, feeling, indication that indicated that you're starting to become unified or settled or undistracted, undisturbed, unscattered. And there's many different, I call it the symptoms of *samādhi*.

And those can be quite subtle. They don't have to be dramatic. It could be that settling into the rhythm of breathing and just really being there, somehow there's a subtle influence of sweetness that spreads around the breathing or with the breathing. The breathing itself feels sweet. Yeah.

That's a *nimitta*. It could be that there's a little glow somewhere in the body, and that's the *nimitta*. It could be that there's light that appears kind of with the eyes closed. That would be called the *nimitta*. It could be that you just feel kind of content and happy.

That's the *nimitta*. So there are many *nimittas*, but to appreciate that, to bring your attention to that, kind of, and let that be held in this wide mind. Let it grow, let yourself be influenced by it, let it be nourished by it. This idea of nutriments that the Buddha emphasizes, I interpret to mean that you're allowed to be nourished. You're allowed to be nourished.

And one way of understanding what it is that's being nourished is it's not something that you are building and making happen. It's a natural process of when there's release, when there's openness, when there's non-clinging, then something can grow. This natural process of Dharma, there is a growing of something from the inside out. And so here's another quote from the Buddha.

In a person who sees the five hindrances are abandoned in themselves, it starts that way.

So to see something, and how do you see something when it's been abandoned? I mean, some of you could have seen hindrances plenty. You've seen them more than you wish, but they're clearly there. But how do you see it when they're absent? You have to lift a pillow or go under the mattress or where do they go when they're abandoned?

Right? What you're seeing when they're abandoned is an absence. And seeing absences is also not very common, not the ordinary way people live their lives, and mostly people want things or want to do away with things. But to appreciate those moments when the mind has some release, some freedom, some absence, some appreciation that when the mind is calm, undisturbed, so you can be nourished by that. Take it in.

And part of Dharma practice is to start recognizing more often than we usually do the moments of peace, the moments of absence, the moments of not clinging, the moments of freedom. You might have 99% of your whole being caught up in a hindrance. You have a good one after all. Good desire. Boy, this is the best one I've ever had, and I'm not going to give this one up.

So like 99% of you is like really into it. Someone who is beginning to grow in the Dharma will start to appreciate that 1% that is not caught in it. So where would you look around inside of you to find a place that's absence of the hindrances, absence of preoccupation, absence of fear, absence of conceit, absence of the things that keep you kind of riled up or agitated? Where would you look around to find, is there a place, one percent of you that's non-agitated, that's calm? Is there even one tenth of a percent of you that feels the symptoms of being concentrated or being calm or settled?

And I would venture to say that for all of you, after these many days on the retreat, it's not just one-tenth of a percent. All of you have available to you now some reference point inside that's more than one-tenth of a percent. Calm, of subtleness, of some kind of peacefulness, some kind of non-disturbance, non-scatterness, some little hints of how to hold it all inside, a wider... broad mind.

In one who sees the five hindrances abandoned in themselves, gladness is born.

I just love that gladness is born. To me, this represents an extremely positive view of our human nature, that we have this natural quality. I mean, usually mothers grow up babies, and the babies get born. And that's a deeply natural process. And similarly, gladness is born.

That's a pretty cool child to have. Gladness is born. And the art of this now is to appreciate where there's an absence of the hindrances. Okay, and 1% of me is not caught in it. There it is.

Or maybe 90% is not caught by it. But to appreciate it, take in, be nourished by it, the goodness of it, the wholesomeness of it, and allow yourself to feel it, to recognize it. Rather than when one hindrance stops, I mean, the obvious thing to do is just get another good one. You know, why wait? Or sometimes, you know, the mind has to be occupied.

It's afraid not to be occupied. It needs to be attaining. It needs to do. It needs to prove itself. It needs to assert itself.

It needs to make itself safe by its stories and ideas. It's hard for the mind to appreciate quiet, stilling, peace, absence. But one of the benefits of this is that it can be delightful to feel the release.

Gladness is born. For one who is glad and joy is born, the body of a person whose mind is joyful becomes tranquil. One whose body is tranquil feels happiness. The mind who, one who is happy, becomes unified, experiences *samādhi*.

It's a very significant passage that we are putting together certain conditions. We're recognizing conditions, and those conditions can begin allowing something to arise, something to grow within us. And this idea of creating space, empty space within for the wholesome goodness inside of us to grow and fill us. And so this goes along with this idea I tried to offer, that the seven factors of awakening are not practices per se, but they're states that grow within us.

Sati is a state of awareness that grows and becomes full, a fullness of presence. Investigation is the growth of clarity, light, illumination. The third factor of awakening of *viriya* is the growth of a healthy kind of vitality. Even if you're sick, you can find a certain kind of deeper kind of vitality that can be very satisfying. Joy is a state.

It's not a particular like little square centimeter somewhere, your lips, smiling or something. It's kind of a state of well-being. Contentment is more like a state. So *samādhi* also is more of a state. It's not a narrow laser focus.

It's the opening and growing of something. So things are growing and evolving. And what's needed for that? The thing I want to emphasize is that the principle always is, find your freedom with it. Find how to be present for it without clinging.

Find how to be in the moment of presence, moments of awareness. There's freedom, however little bit that you get a taste of. But the littlest taste is exactly the same taste of *nibbāna*. You're participating in the *nibbānic* world. You're participating in the world of *nibbāna* if you begin feeling how good it is to be present without clinging.

And one of the values of *samādhi* is that a *samādhi* is a state of non-clinging. The stronger the *samādhi*, the stronger the non-clinging. You might have a habit of clinging, so you might bring a little bit along. But, you know, it's all going to work out eventually. Don't worry.

It'll grow and expand and move into the places where there's still desires, move into the place where there's still aversion, move into the areas where there's still some kind of conceit, all in its own time. Don't worry about it. So here, as a factor of awakening, *samādhi* is not the practice of concentration, but rather the consequence of developing a steady, steady mind, a stable mind, a unified mind. That can occur if we just kind of are very gentle and persistent to stay close, be intimate with something like the breathing. Stay very simple so that your mind is not becoming scattered, it's not jumping around, it's not getting pulled into its thoughts.

And so when I was a kid, I remember I think it was second grade, there was this sandbox in the playground. And some of the kids would bring these little U-shaped red magnets. And there were times we would take those magnets and we would skim the surface of the sand because there was a little kind of iron or flint, a little black kind of flecks, that would get lined up with the magnetic pull. So we could go over and over again and line all these things up in the sand. Somehow that was pretty cool.

So it's kind of like the repetition, coming back, being here with this, being here with this, steadying, whether it's just for five seconds, or whether it's the whole sitting just somehow in a peaceful way, getting absorbed in the breathing. So that's all there is in the universe, is just the experience of breathing. Not to be tight at all, but to give the chance for you to experience your mind unscattered, unpreoccupied, unagitated. Because if you get in a healthy way, give yourself to each moment of breathing, just breathing like just this moment, mindful there, find your freedom in that moment with a breath. And then the next one, the next one, there's not going to be much room for a lot of distracting thoughts to pour in.

They might still be in the background, but they're not being fed. What's being fed is the *samādhi*, is the mindfulness, is these factors of awakening, especially if you can feel them and sense them and know them and recognize them. To recognize the symptoms, the signs of awareness, the state, to recognize some modicum of clarity, to recognize a vitality, to recognize some contentment, maybe content doing the practice, some joy, some stability, some gathering, unification, all around just being simple with the breathing, coming and going. Or

there is something that distracts you or is stronger than the breathing. I shouldn't use the word distraction if something strong comes up, rather than seeing it as being unfortunate.

Right? Organize yourself around that, however long it's there. If the knee hurts, just organize yourself around that pain. So the seven factors of awakening are right there with that. And if that's too big of a type of goal, just mindful.

Appreciating the degree to which you can have non-clinging in the mindfulness, non-insistence, non-assertiveness, non-resistance, just know that. And it's the recognizing of this non-clinging, this freedom that is really useful because it really helps you, guides you into having a healthy, balanced practice. If you don't recognize the freedom in a single moment of mindfulness, maybe your mindfulness is not free. Maybe you're caught. Right?

And maybe even you're reinforcing caughtness. You're going to reinforce it, clinging, by the very way in which you practice. How would you practice to reinforce freedom? How would you practice? So you begin becoming attuned, aligned, in harmony with these seven factors of awakening and to do so very modestly, to be content with it, the subtle symptoms of them, but enough symptoms, enough feeling and sense of them, that they're guiding you.

So here, this is the way. Yes, this is the way to go. This is the way to go. This is the way to grow. May hallelujah practice reveal to you freedom.

May how you practice contain within it the goal of freedom, release. May it be for you that the means and the goal are not separate one moment at a time.