

Wednesday Dharma talk

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I believe and know from my own experience, but I believe that it's easy to underestimate the discourse on the four ways of establishing awareness, the four foundations of mindfulness. It's easy to read it as being dry, technical, maybe even disconnected from some of the important things that we focus on in our lives. But to know the text well and to follow it, and follow the path in it, you'll appreciate we're coming to the crescendo, the glorious crescendo.

And I think the devas are happy because there's music to go with it. I don't know if people online can hear it, but there's music coming through the window. If there are devas, they come every Wednesday afternoon. But sometimes things are not coincidences.

And here we're going to talk about the seven factors of awakening, part of the crescendo that it's all been working toward. And to present this to you, I bet it might be useful to recount what we've been through, and some of the highlights that I think are particularly important to notice as we go through the *Satipaṭṭhāna*. It begins with mindfulness of breathing.

Of course, that doesn't work for everyone, but breathing, one way or the other, sits at the nexus of our life. It's one of the very important crossroads where so much of our life comes through and meets in our breathing. And so, to establish ourselves at that crossroad and really care for ourselves at this deep, deep, deep biological, psychological, emotional center is to care for ourselves well.

To know the breathing, to know the breathing, and as we breathe, to feel the whole body. It says this is not a disembodied practice. The body is not left at the door. All of you is included here, and then to calm, to quiet this body.

Not an easy thing to do, but there can be a way of being reassured in a deep way by the simple experience of breathing. If the breathing can be peaceful and natural, and we just allow

ourselves to breathe in an easy way. I've known people who have been hurt or have panic attacks, and someone will come and tell them to breathe deeply, to regulate their breath, to somehow manage to get through it.

And it's one of the great pleasures of meditation to discover the natural breathing, where the breathing is breathing itself, with a sense of ease and comfort and well-being that can be exquisite. And then it goes on to know sensations in our body. So this emphasis on the body, sensations, our sense life.

And then it does a sad thing and talks about the corpses. But part of the exercise in all these corpses is explicitly to appreciate that one day you will be a corpse like that, or something like that. And to go from sensations to corpse, the big difference is that the corpse doesn't feel sensations.

The vitality of life is not there, and I see it almost as a pointer back: now, it's this life. You're alive now. One day you won't be alive. This is the time to feel, be with yourself, feel what's going on here, feel these sensations that are a manifestation of being alive, your life.

And then to start tuning in more deeply to that part of the world of sensations, and have a simplification process, a dropping away of so much baggage we carry, and to come to more of a settled place where we're starting to notice more the feeling tone of the sensations. Something deeper, something that's very instructive. It teaches us what's wholesome and unwholesome when we start tuning into the quality and the characteristics of the pleasure, the pain.

Pleasure and pain is not just kind of amoeba-like. It's deeply connected to our nervous system and our messaging systems that go on in our body. So to start being more attuned to what's pleasant and unpleasant is not just raw pleasure and pain. There's a whole network of deep understanding, deep sensing, that comes along with that.

And so, getting intimate with this deeper messaging body, this deeper process of communication or information, the way the body works and reveals itself. And part of that is to discover, or pointed out by the Buddha, that there are these two distinct forms of pleasure, forms of pain. They're not all the same.

There's a very useful distinction to feel into, and that is what I call the surface pleasure and pain, and the deep pleasure and pain. The pleasure and pain that has a lot to do with what's happening in the world around us and what we arrange for the world to do to us. Go buy ice cream.

And what is born deep inside, some translators will translate this as spiritual feelings, spiritual pleasure, spiritual pain. And so here again, we're tuning in to something deep. We're turning to something that's coming alive in us. And we're seeing something about what's really valuable.

I know ice cream is valuable, but maybe there's something that's more valuable, more important, more enduring, more that gives us a deep sense of, may I say, meaning, purpose, a deep sense of ease and freedom, belonging. There's so many benefits that come from being centered in this deep place within. What I sometimes call the deep operating system, the deep mind.

That's not dependent on ice cream, not dependent on moving the world around to fit our desires and what we want, and getting everything lined up just right so that we have comfortable enough pleasure from the world. But a happiness and well-being that is not dependent on the world, but we carry with us into the world. We carry with us our well-being from this deeper place, so it's not so dependent on getting it from the world.

So it's a phenomenal pointing. And then that distinction plays itself out a bit further in the second foundation, where we start seeing some of the forces that come into play with the surface mind, the surface pleasures, the surface reactivities: greed, hatred, and delusion. They're natural enough for us to have, but it's not natural enough that we live by them.

They hurt. We suffer, and it's the way that human beings are. It's just about natural for greed, hate, and delusion, when acted on, to hurt other people too. But to see it for what it is, and not be identified with it, not be consumed by it, to see it's a mind with greed, a mind with hatred or delusion, so that we can start making room again for something deeper than greed, hate, and delusion that too many people in this world are consumed by.

And so, the second half of this third foundation, once we see greed, hate, and delusion, is to see the alternative, to see the expanded mind, big mind, to see a mind which feels like, "This is a healthy mind." The text is called the ultimate mind. That is the mind that you can feel when there's deeply settled meditation, where there's a homeostasis, harmony, that's come in the mind.

There's unification in the mind. Mind is settled, operating without any hiccups, without any resistance, without any fragmentation, without any stress or tension. And so there's no limitations to the awareness, to the mind. Mind seems like it has no boundaries anymore, just expanded and wide.

I mean, it's pretty awesome that this exists and it's possible. And the ultimate mind, the

healthy mind that comes from this unification, and then a steadied mind or settled mind, that the mind cannot not be activated and restless. The mind doesn't have to be spinning and jumping out of itself. Or the mind can have a deep sense of being steadied.

And this steadiness or settleness is so important because the more steady it is, the more clearly we can see. The more we're clearing away the agitation that limits the natural freedom that the mind is capable of. And then we come to the fourth foundation.

And just like the second and third, this one's also divided into two halves. The second one is between the surface pleasures and the deep ones. The third one is the mind with greed, hate, and delusion, and the mind that's free of it. And now we're talking about the mind that's caught in itself, the attachments of the mind, versus the mind or the being, the inner life, that's free of the attachments, that's allowed to grow to fulfillment.

And this is, I think, part of the crescendo of this text. It's bringing us to the seven factors. It says one knows how the seven factors of awakening grow into fulfillment, to fill us. Wow.

It has the same language as the hindrances, where it says one knows the hindrance is there. One knows it's absent. One knows how the hindrance comes to be. One knows the abandoning of the hindrance.

In these seven factors, one knows each one. One knows when it's not there. One knows how it comes to be. And it doesn't say abandon it. It says one knows how it grows to fulfillment.

So some people hear, you know, "Abandon the hindrances," and it's just like, "There you go, these Buddhists again. Just let go, let go, let go. That's all they ever talk about. Let go, and—I mean, they're the super party poopers, the way they just let go, and there's no self, and just deal with it."

That's not the message here. The message is leading to this amazing crescendo, the growth of these beautiful qualities, seven factors of awakening, which the tradition—the metaphor that's used for it—is a treasure. Apparently, the great rulers in India had seven treasures that kind of represented their royalty. And here the seven factors of awakening are, for us, each of us, like these royal treasures we have.

And what I love about this metaphor is that, once again—because I haven't told you, but in plenty of places—the whole orientation the Buddha has to us, to speaking to us through the teachings, is to see us just about as royalty. That level of respect and care, that we count, we're important. It isn't the teaching of not-self that you're supposed to be self-effacing and not count, pretend you're not there for anybody.

It's almost the opposite. There's a royalty, there's a dignity that is granted to human beings, and to do this practice is to set this inner royalty, this dignity, free, allow it to be there. Which can't be there if you're selfish. It can't be there if you're conceited, because you're not royalty.

That doesn't work. The two don't go together. But it's a kind of very positive orientation. So the seven factors of awakening are these jewels, these treasures.

The other metaphor for the seven factors of awakening is the one that I gave half the story to you before, and that is the river where irrigation channels are dug, and so the water is diverted. And the way the actual text goes, it isn't that the river runs dry. But rather, it's a big river with a beautiful, clear, strong current that just flows steadily and quietly.

When the river is cascading down the mountains with waterfalls and rapids, it's pretty noisy. But once it gets down in the plains, it's a big, wide river. It's amazing how much strength and power and movement there is that flows harmoniously across the great Ganges River.

But if the farmers irrigate their water, make canals, and enough of the water gets pulled out, the current gets all skewed. There's less water; it doesn't flow so easily anymore, and it kind of gets noisy again, flowing over rocks, and it's problematic. So that's where the hindrances are.

If the banks of the river are repaired, so no water flows into the irrigation canals, then the river becomes swift and powerful again. And it's the seven factors of awakening that create this healthy, continuous riverbank that supports the flow of this amazing current. So here we're back to the metaphor of water again—the water that's going to carry us.

The first deep transformative experience from this practice of mindfulness comes when we somehow enter that stream, and wow, feel you're being carried now by something really powerful, really compelling. The stream, the stream of freedom, the onward-leading stream. So the seven factors of awakening are kind of the crescendo, and they're these beautiful qualities, treasures.

This is where it's all been going from the very beginning. In case you thought it was boring. This is—I should have told you at the beginning, and you would have been at the edge of your seat more. How are we getting there?

And as I've quoted it before, the way I quoted it, translated it, the idea is to know these seven factors of awakening, how they grow to fill us. The word is *bhāvanā*. With a conjugation about that helping us grow or making us grow, it can mean grow, but it also sometimes is translated as cultivation.

To cultivate: a farmer cultivates plants, helps them to grow. It's not uncommon colloquially in English to say *bhāvanā* means practice, but it's very different. The feeling around saying it's a practice of seven factors of awakening, or if you say they're growing, you're cultivating them. You're making it possible for these things to grow and develop and fill us.

So, one of the refrains, which I hardly talked about here so far in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, is after every exercise, there's a whole refrain that emphasizes seeing the arising and passing, seeing the impermanence and constancy of our experience. And our tradition puts a lot of emphasis on seeing impermanence. And sometimes they'll even say everything is impermanent, everything is inconstant, all conditioned things are inconstant.

It's a kind of deep doctrinal orthodoxy to say that. It seems the Buddha never said it that way, and it doesn't quite make sense because with the seven factors of awakening, for example, he does not say, "See how they're impermanent, see how they come and go." They're not supposed to go. They're supposed to grow into something full, fill us.

Some things, some states, are enduring. Of course, everything is impermanent. Things will disappear, but that's not the emphasis. Seeing the seven factors of awakening coming and going, arising and passing, is not the emphasis.

Emphasis: see them endure. See them continue. See them continue through time. See them flow in you and linger in you and nurture you, nourish you. Allow them to do that.

And this is very important because what we're trying to do here, one of the functions of all this, is not just have a good time, not to have, you know, pleasure and joy and happiness and go home and say, "Well, I had a happy holiday at Thyrsi for a month." The idea is these seven factors of awakening, as they grow in us, they're very reassuring. They bring a deep sense of well-being that allows the heart, the mind, to settle.

Allows the heart and mind to relax and soften. Allows the defensiveness of the heart, the resentments of the inner life, the fears we have, to begin to calm down. Calm down. We know something now.

We feel, with the seven factors of awakening, something about their presence coursing through our body, that we feel very safe, very happy, contented, very peaceful. And they make us sensitive in a very special way, very sensitive to anything that disturbs that peace, anything that disturbs that well-being. What disturbs it?

The hindrances, the concepts, ideas, the constructs of the mind that we overlay on reality with grasping, the knots, the way we get entangled in sense experiences. These are all ways

that, if any of that's operating, we have a heightened sensitivity. "Oh no, this is not—this is not something to participate with now."

But we don't want to get rid of them or attack them or judge ourselves for having them. It's okay. It's really okay. But with the seven factors of awakening present, something releases. Something lets go.

So in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice, or in the early texts, some things are seen as being impermanent, inconstant, and changing, and some things are allowed to be there. I was very surprised when I went through the deeper practice of mindfulness to go through a phase where everything seemed to be impermanent and changing, but it turned out to just be a phase of practice. This radical impermanence, radical dissolution of things.

And then it opened up to a different phase where things got slow again. I was like, "What? Not everything. What happened to the rapid rising and passing?" Now they were slow, and they kind of moved through. And there were these states of the seven factors of awakening, which were present. They weren't coming and going.

So there is a lot of emphasis in *Vipassanā* to see constancy, see change, see things coming and going. It's considered to be the first and primary insight of insight meditation. But I think it's not helpful to think that's all there is. This expression, "all conditioned things are impermanent," is a poor translation of the original.

It's probably not accurate. The context where the Buddha said that was talking about the five bundles, talking about appearances and sensations and perceptions, their recognitions. We have the constructs and the cognition, the consciousness. These are all constructs of the mind.

Those constructs, thoughts, ideas, they come and go. They are fragile. They are impermanent. They are impermanent natures of things. Seeing them—and that's where we attach, that's where we get caught—so to see them for what they are, that is freeing.

To see the seven factors of awakening as impermanent is not necessary because they are freeing. Of course, you can get attached to the idea of the seven factors of awakening, but then you're back in the constructing mind. And so the idea is to see very carefully that there is the arising and passing of these constructs and ideas that we get attached to, so that we stop reaching for them, we stop holding tight to them, and are able to let go and soften.

In the context of the seven factors of awakening, this prepares us. This kind of makes us soft enough and relaxed enough, undefended enough, or unfrozen enough, that something very profound could happen. So the seven factors of awakening are not a goal; they're the

preparation. They're kind of conditioning us, shaping us, preparing us for a release, for a deep release, deep freedom.

So the seven factors of awakening are awareness itself. Usually in English we call it mindfulness. The second one is usually called investigation in English. I like to render the word as clarity, because it's not probing into something to understand it better, analyze it, or take it apart and understand its workings.

It's rather having the clarity to be able to see distinct things as distinct. If there's a really thick fog here at IRC, you can't quite—you might maybe see the trees are a little bit far away—you can't quite see the difference between maybe one tree and another. If you look at all the leaves, they're all kind of mushed together in the fog.

But as the fog clears, you see them distinctly, and you see the trees distinct from each other. And maybe even see there's different species of trees that you didn't see in the fog. As we settle in practice and there's clarity, we start seeing very important distinctions.

And that's what the *Satipaṭṭhāna* has been doing all along: the distinction between surface sensations and the deep ones, between the mind that is involved with greed, hate, and delusion and the mind without it, the mind that's involved with these different kinds of attachments—the ones that involve a lot of stories, just a little bit of constructed ideas, to almost none—and the mind or the being that is growing these beautiful qualities.

That is deeper, from the deep mind that cannot be grown by the surface mind. So you start seeing these distinctions. And the distinction I've mentioned a number of times so far is the difference between wholesome and unwholesome. Not to figure things out, but it starts standing out in highlight. “Oh, this is the way forward. This is wholesome.”

You know, it's only eleven o'clock in the morning, and I haven't reached the fifteenth *jhāna* yet. And, you know, I should get on with it. So we bear down, we grind our teeth, thinking, “Well, if I really work hard, that's what it takes.” And then by two o'clock in the afternoon, you go to the manager and say, “I think I need to go to the dentist.”

And the manager says, “What? Didn't you know it was unwholesome to grind your teeth that hard just to get concentrated?” “No, Gil never said that.” Oh, you're supposed to know yourself that that's unwholesome, that kind of straining.

So to see these distinctions, that's what investigation means. The literal word in Pāli comes closer to the English expression “the discrimination of *dhammas*.” I like to, because the word discrimination is kind of a bad word, translate it as differentiation of experiences, distinguishing experiences for what they are. But clarity to be able to sit back and really be able to see

clearly what's going on here, and then knowing what's wholesome, knowing what's good, and being clear about that.

There is effort, there's energy. It gets fun, it gets wonderful, it's inspiring, it's meaningful to apply yourself in the practice and to do it in a wholesome way. And we know what wholesome is, yes. And so this sense of yes to doing the practice, the energy is there for it.

And there's something about applying wholesome effort, wholesome energy, that awakens within us a sense of well-being, a joy, a joy of participation, joy of inner life working together in harmony. And joy and happiness arises, meditative joy. And then this is followed by tranquility, calm.

At some point, joy is kind of excited, and then it quiets down, and there's a calming, quieting. And then there is concentration, unification, coming together, a deeper, deeper peaceful gathering together of the mind here. And then the final one, when that gathering and settling and harmonizing is kind of complete, there's a deep equanimity, equanimity factor of awakening, which is the freedom from reactivity, freedom from reactive responses to what's happening.

And it's kind of the absence of reactivity. But it's more than that because it feels actually like a healthy state in itself. It feels like now this whole state of being feels settled, peaceful, equanimous, spacious.

And as we do this practice, these seven factors of awakening, as the practice grows, matures, they become more and more salient, more and more relevant. And you can sometimes feel their presence. Sometimes you can feel the presence of a number of them together. Sometimes all of them.

It tends to happen most when the simplification process has gone pretty far, and there's not much going on anymore. Mind is quiet and still. The constructing of a body maybe has stopped. The body is very soft, gentle. We feel at home in our breath, just cruising along.

But then, some of them are called activating forces, energizing forces, and some are called tranquilizing. And sometimes it's helpful to make really simple adjustments. When we're too tranquil in practice, give more emphasis to the activating ones; and when we're too activated, emphasize the calming ones.

So the activating ones are this clarity, investigation, energy itself, vitality itself, and joy. And so, can you brighten the mind? Can you look more carefully? Can you arouse some inspired effort, just enough to bring the kind of waking up that you need to really be able to do this practice?

And joy sometimes is available. Many of us don't avail ourselves of all the joy and happiness that's here. Just look around and understand our good fortune. The blue sky, the sunlight, the plants—all kinds of things that can bring joy.

And if we're too energetic, then there's tranquility, *samādhi*, and equanimity to call upon to bring us into balance. And that leaves mindfulness out, awareness, and it's said that awareness is the balancing factor. And this is one of the remarkable aspects of this practice: you actually shouldn't be spending a lot of time tinkering, adjusting, and making things better, and getting the seven factors of awakening just perfectly balanced.

At some point, what becomes very, very important in this practice, almost necessary, is to trust awareness, trust the mindfulness. You have to be aware. You have to have that turned on. But that's enough.

Whatever is happening, have clarity, clear awareness of it, and then allow the inner system—maybe the deep mind, the deep heart—allow it to take care of it for you. To stop being the agent of change, the one in charge, the one who's going to fix things, make things better. At some point in this practice, we get out of the way and allow the unfolding of things.

Under the light of awareness, things shift and change, adjust, and the seven factors of awakening will come into balance on their own if we're clearly aware. We're aware they're imbalanced, and then you say, “Well, they're imbalanced. Let's see this more clearly. Let's find, like, the question is where? Where is the imbalance? Where do I feel it?”

And then hold that and be with that place for a while. Just going to be present, offer present attention to whatever is going on. And you probably see at some point that things come into balance on their own.

I spent a lot of time leaning a lot when I was meditating, and when I learned to do *Vipassanā*, I'd bring a lot of careful attention to where either the collapsing was, the pulling down, where the leaning was most intense in my body, or where the pushing was. I sometimes had a feeling of pushing inside, and I just held those feelings in my awareness. And just being present that way for it, lo and behold, the body would straighten itself out.

Wow! I didn't have to do it; the body did it itself. But I had to be there, present for it. I'm not saying it's that easy for everyone else, but at some point in this practice, maybe not today, but at some point, we get out of the way and rely on awareness, trust awareness.

No more fixing, no more changing, no more being the agent or the person in charge. Then there's no more need for judging, no more need for being critical or wanting, and then have

this very deep trust that there's something inside, the *Dharma* inside, that will find its way for you. I love the expression, “The *Dharma* knows best.”

Dharma knows best, what's best for you. And why I like this is that I like that expression for myself the most when things are difficult, rather than when things are going well. “Oh well, the *Dharma* knows what I need right now, and this is what I got. Okay, I got to practice with it. That's the deal. That's my job.”

The *Dharma* knows what I need to be dealing with. So it's not what I would have chosen myself, but something knows that this is where I'm going to grow, and what needs to be done.

So the seven factors of awakening: to learn to recognize them, learn to recognize them as more like states. To recognize them as nourishment, to recognize the goodness that comes with them. To not go chasing for their impermanence, but rather to make room to allow them to grow and linger and stay.

And it's possible in the mind to do a kind of multitasking. It's possible to be resting in these good feelings, these good states, and having the clear vision, seeing clearly the arising and passing of things, the arising and passing of the constructs and other things. And so at some point, as we get to this climax—and it doesn't have to be this retreat, but this is where else the mindfulness practice is going—is to a time and place where we feel the seven factors of awakening within us.

They've grown. They've grown and changed us, because whatever grows inside of you becomes part of who you are. And they grow and change, and you become different. And you relax. You soften. You open.

You feel reassured. You feel good. And then you're ready again for seeing the arising and passing of things. And that's for tomorrow.

The final exercise, the culmination of all this path that we're doing, culminates in a deep seeing that is liberating. So, as I draw this talk to a close, I feel very fortunate to be here with all of you, and to have had this chance to meet you personally, and offer support for your practice, and experience all of you, every one of you, your sincerity, your dedication, with the challenges and the joys of this practice.

All of you are more settled, more concentrated, more peaceful than you realize, in spite of what your surface mind might be telling you. These seven factors of awakening might be more available for you to notice than you realize. They might be subtle, but they might be here.

Maybe there's a way of adjusting your heart, your mind, yourself, reorienting yourself, so you can see with clarity rather than obscured by some pre-existing beliefs or ideas or projects that you have. And in the clarity, feel and sense how you're aware, simple mindfulness. How there's some clarity here. The vitality of life that's here, the flow of sensations.

How there is some well-being, something about how you are that you say yes to and smile. Something inside of you, something here, is calm, and maybe calming for you. And maybe there is a unification, a gathering together, coming into some kind of *samādhī*, harmony.

And maybe in certain circumstances here, you feel your equanimity that maybe you wouldn't ordinarily have had. Maybe you're phenomenally equanimous, standing in line for food. Maybe you wouldn't recognize yourself three weeks ago because of how calmly you can stand in a line.

Trust awareness. Tap into whatever trust you have in being aware, present for yourself. Thank you.