**The Ordinary and the Seven Factors of Awakening**

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Buddhist practice develops ordinary capacities so that they can serve on the path of awakening. Rather than cultivating new abilities, with this practice we learn to identify, appreciate, and strengthen ones we already have. Doing so we discover that these capacities are treasures within.

The Seven Factors of Awakening are seven mental capacities so valued as part of Buddhist practice that they are known as “inner wealth.” These factors are mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. While the title “Factors of Awakening” may seem lofty—perhaps disconnected from our ordinary life—they are actually the developed forms of mental qualities used regularly in the midst of everyday activities.

Take driving as an example. As we stay attentive to the driving conditions in the present we are using an everyday form of mindfulness. We maintain this mindfulness by not letting ourselves get distracted by the sights around us or by a conversation with a passenger.

As a factor of awakening, investigation is the ability to clearly distinguish the details of that which we are mindful. It is perceiving simple pragmatic distinctions in our present moment experience. In driving we are making distinctions constantly about the conditions of the road and how to steer, brake, and accelerate. For skilled drivers, doing this can seem natural and almost effortless, but without careful discernment regarding the surrounding traffic conditions, driving would not be safe.

Energy, the third factor, is applying our self to the task at hand. In driving we need to apply some energy to adjusting the steering wheel, staying attentive, and considering our response to what is happening on the road. The habit to do so may be automatic enough we don’t think of the effort as self–conscious work. Energetic effort can combine with investigation to create a delightful sense of interest, for example when we try out driving a new car for the first time.

Joy and tranquility are not always associated with driving, especially if we are driving in commute traffic. However, certain types of driving can be very pleasant and relaxing, for example, a meandering drive on a beautiful country road or a smooth, unhurried drive on a straight, traffic–free freeway. Many people have found delight in the sense of freedom a car can provide. And a few people have discovered how to be happy and calm even in rush hour traffic by tapping into a well–being independent of the driving conditions.

Concentration is the ability to be intently and fully focused. In a difficult traffic condition or tricky maneuver we give our full attention to driving while letting go of thoughts and concerns unrelated to the driving. Once the driving challenge is over, the level of concentration can decrease and our thoughts again include other things besides driving.

Finally, while equanimity may seldom be associated with driving, it is often present if we remain relaxed and at ease while negotiating expected and normal traffic obstacles like red lights and oncoming traffic. Those times when we are unhurried we may be unperturbed by driving challenges such as a traffic delay, a detour in our route, or a flat tire.

By recognizing these seven factors as mental states operating in daily life we can then understand that meditation relies on ordinary capacities we already have rather than the introduction of new abilities foreign to our experience. In this way we may be able to access these seven mental states as they already live inside of us. Once accessed, we can develop them further.

Just as the seven factors are useful in daily life, they are helpful in meditation practice. In daily life they support a wholehearted involvement with what we are doing. In meditation they support a wholehearted engagement with the practice. The more they are present, the easier it is to be fully engaged with the practice. They help make meditation more satisfying and beneficial.

The seven factors are mutually supportive. For example, we can understand them as developing in a spiral fashion. As mindfulness starts to become established one can begin to investigate, i.e., see ever more clearly what is happening in the present moment. Investigation evokes effort and interest. Interested effort brings joy. The well being of joy relaxes mental and emotional agitation, which brings tranquility. Tranquility supports concentration. And all of these six are conditions for having equanimity. With greater equanimity, the more mindfulness grows and the spiral of development continues.

The seven factors also work together to find balance between the energizing and the calming aspects of meditation. Investigation, effort, and joy are energizing and can be called on when energy is too low; tranquility, concentration, and equanimity are calming and can be called on when energy is too high. Mindfulness itself is called the ‘great balancer’ because the clear recognition of imbalance by mindfulness helps bring the other factors into balance.

Because the seven factors of awakening are such a useful part of Buddhist practice it is helpful to spend time becoming more familiar with them. This can be as simple as recognizing them when they are present, even in minor degrees. We may also be able to bring them forth and to support their growth, e.g. by being diligent in the mindfulness practice and then appreciating the presence of the factors as they appear. As we become more familiar with the factors we may be able to call on them and nourish them, they become the leavening of our spiritual practice.

The seven factors are called the “Factors of Awakening” when they provide the clarity, calm, and wisdom that brings “awakening”, i.e., being aware without being attached. Because awakening is often seen as a distant ideal, it is also helpful to recognize the significant ways that being ‘awake’ occurs in our ordinary life. For some people the experience of awakening refreshed from a nap may provide a good example. In waking up clear and relaxed each of the seven factors of awakening may be present. While still laying in bed, our daily concerns may have receded and replaced with a simple mindfulness or open awareness of our present moment circumstances. Relaxed “investigation” may be operating as we study the light coming in through the window or the dancing movement of the curtains in the breeze. While we may not be making any self–conscious effort we may be nicely re–energized in as way that makes awareness easy and clear. There may be simple joy and tranquility as we lay in the bed before getting up. Concentration may be present if we get absorbed in watching the pattern of sunlight on the wall or ceiling. And there may be lots of equanimity as things that bothered us before the nap are now remembered with a relaxed, broad perspective.

All these post–nap experiences can be seen as characteristics of the Buddhist ideal of Awakening. In this way awakening is not something foreign or strange, rather, it is the full flowering of a capacity that we already have some experience with.

In Buddhism full Awakening is being aware without clinging to anything. When the seven factors of awakening are developed, non–clinging becomes more and more natural. The factors provide a sense of inner treasure that is a welcome alternative to all forms of clinging. They help us to grow our ordinary, everyday capacity to not cling so it matures into an experience of liberating awakening.