Factors for Awakening

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First, get your body in position. Sit up comfortably straight, face forward, close your eyes, place your hands in your lap. Then get your mind in position. We have that chanan. And thoughts of goodwill or metta remind us of why we’re here. We’re here to find true happiness, the happiness that doesn’t harm the true happiness of anyone else. And where do we look? We look within. That’s where the mind has to be. Look to see what resources you have here to develop a true happiness. In the beginning, it may not seem like much. You’ve got the body sitting here breathing. You’ve got the mind that can think and be aware. It’s by putting those things together that they actually grow. In other words, you think about the breath and then try to be sensitive to where you feel the breathing. Knowing when it’s coming in, knowing when it’s going out. And then staying with those sensations. I take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths just to highlight the feeling of the breathing of the body. And if a long breathing feels good, feels nourishing, keep it up. If it feels tiresome, you can change. Make the breath shorter, more shallow, more subtle. See how that feels. Make it faster or slower, heavier or lighter. Keep playing with it until you find what feels just right. That’s getting the mind into position. It’s not all that hard. The hard part is keeping it there, noticing when it’s wandered off and bringing it right back. The best thing, of course, is not to wait until it’s wandered off. Try to get to notice the signs of when it’s about to wander off. It’s like an inchworm coming to the edge of a leaf, and one part of it is still hanging on to the edge of the leaf. And the other part is waving around, looking for another leaf to come past. And if another breeze blows another leaf its way, then it latches on to the other leaf and lets go of the first. The mind is like that. Part of it will be staying with the breath, and the other part is getting a little bit bored and starts waving around. We tend to hide this from ourselves, which is why we don’t catch it, which is why so often we realize that we’ve left the breath only after we’ve been away from it for quite a while. So you want to be alert to this habit of the mind. There are different ways of trying to prevent it. One is trying to keep track of two spots in the body at once, instead of just one. You can think of the sensation of the breath in the middle of the head and the sensation down at the base of the spine. And think of a line connecting the two. Your duty is to stay aware of both at once. You can become conscious of your hands. So you’re aware of the breath in the head and also of the breath sensations in the hands. You can feel breath sensations anywhere in the body. Breathing is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s a flow of energy. And as you explore the energy in the body, you find there are all different kinds of energy there. There’s the flowing energy. There’s the energy that’s still there, even when you’ve breathed out. There’s still a kind of breath in the body that doesn’t go anywhere. It’s just the basic background hum of having a nervous system. And then the new breath comes in and mingles with that. And if you find yourself struggling for breath or if the breathing is laborious, change the picture you have in the mind. Think of the breath energy outside just pressing to come in. You don’t have to pull it in. It’s going to come in on its own. All you have to do is let it come. Think of all the possible breath channels in the body, opening them up. In other words, one way of keeping the mind from wandering off is to give it enough to do in the present moment, to be occupied, to get absorbed, to get interested in the breath. You’re trying to develop a full body awareness. The broader your awareness in the present, the more steadily you can keep it broad, the harder it’s going to be for it to slip off into the past or the future. Slipping off into the past or future is like going down a tiny little tube. You have to make your awareness very small to fit through the tube. So if you keep it large, it’s not going to fit. That’s why you keep yourself as firmly established as you can. You’ll probably slip off every now and then, but the important thing then is to come right back, not to stop and gaze at the flowers and look at the birds or whatever else is going on in the mind. You’ve got work to do here. The work is to develop your mindfulness and alertness as much as you can. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind, as when you’re keeping the breath in mind here. Alertness is the ability to watch and see what you’re actually doing. You combine those two qualities with ardency. You try to do this well. It’s not just a matter of watching whatever comes and goes and accepting it as coming and going. The Buddha didn’t teach simple acceptance. He taught equanimity as one of the factors of awakening, but it’s only one. And it’s not going to work on its own. You need the mindfulness, which in this case is keeping the body or the breath in mind. And then you need what he calls analysis of qualities. Noticing what the mind is doing that’s skillful. Noticing what it’s doing that’s not skillful. Noticing how the breath and the body have an influence on each other through the means of the breath. Noticing what kinds of breathing are good for the mind, what kinds of breathing are conducive to sloth, torpor, restlessness. And at the same time, what kinds of states in the mind are good for the breathing or bad for your breathing. You want to learn how to observe this clearly. When Jon Fogler, my teacher, would teach meditation, he used the word “be observant” more than any other instruction. Notice how different things affect the body. Notice how different things affect the mind. Now the breath is a conduit that can have a good or bad effect on both. The next factor of awakening is effort, right effort. Once you’ve noticed that something is skillful, you try to encourage it. If something is unskillful, you try to let it go and then keep it from arising again. So when you’ve noticed that the mind has wandered off, as I said, you bring it right back. Do your best to establish mindfulness. And the steadier your mindfulness, the more easily it slips into concentration. This is where the remaining factors of awakening come in. The first is rapture, which actually has a broad range of meanings. It doesn’t necessarily mean St. Teresa going into ecstatic fits. It can be just a sense of fullness, refreshment. Or it can take stronger forms. But this comes as you engage. You get more and more at home with the breath, you feel more and more at ease with the breath, and a sense of just really belonging right here, a sense of coming back, coming back home to fitting in your body in a way that feels just right. It’s a sense of refreshment and well-being. As you get more and more subtle, you find there’s a sense of serenity, which leads to concentration. The mind gets more and more firmly established here. And then there’s equanimity. There’s a sense of rapture may fade. It’s left with a very still sense of well-being, that things are just right. They no longer need to be adjusted. Everything feels good. The breath feels good. The body feels right. The mind feels still and unperturbed. It’s all of these qualities together that you’re trying to develop in the meditation. So the extent to which you watch things coming and going is because you want to understand how they come, how they go. In particular, what states of mind are skillful and which ones are not, which ways of breathing are skillful and which ones are not. How cause and effect are playing out in your present awareness. Then you can learn how to adjust the causes so they give rise to the effects you want. So there’s a whole cluster of factors in the mind that will keep you here in right concentration, just right concentration, not so strong that you lose consciousness, and not so light that you’re just flitting around. You really do want to stay right here in a sense of being steady, snug with your meditation, snug with the body, snug with the breath. Everything is beginning to fit together, fit together more and more snugly. These are the qualities. You want to develop them. And as you develop them, then you can learn how to put them to use, to learn more about the mind than just the ability to put it in concentration. Once the mind is still, you can watch it as it moves, even in the stillness or as it tries to move from the stillness. You can catch it and begin to notice how is it that the mind creates these metal worlds for itself. In the beginning, you simply want to zap them. You sense them arising in the range of your breath, in the range of your broadened awareness, simply as disturbances. And it’s a good practice to breathe through them, to clear out those energy tangles as quickly as you can. In the process of doing that, you begin to catch the mind at different stages, forming what’s called a state of becoming. This is one of the worlds of the mind in which you travel. We tend to hop from these worlds, one to the next, to the next, like a hobo hopping on different trains. The problem is like a hobo hopping on a train. You’re not much comfort there. There’s always a catch. So you have to hop to another train, and then another one, and then another one. You want to learn to see how this happens. And it’s that same problem we talked about earlier—the mind being in one thought world and beginning to prepare for the next one to hop to, where you’re barely being aware of it. When the mind is really still, you can begin to see these things as they happen. You can catch the point where the mind is snagged by the appeal of these different thought worlds. You can begin to see their downside, that they really do entail stress, they really do entail suffering. And you can also see why you don’t have to go there. There’s no need to hop from them. That’s when insight really begins to have an impact on the mind. You see how the mind creates suffering, and you see that it’s not necessary. That’s when you really let go. So there are essentially three stages to the meditation. One, learning how to do it. Two, learning how to maintain it. And three, learning how to put it to use. And you want to develop skill in all three. Sometimes we tend to want to skip over the first steps and want to go straight for the insights. But if the foundation isn’t strong, things tend to wobble. And when things wobble, they’re not clear. It’s like a scientific expression. The instruments are wobbling. You can’t really trust what the instruments say. You have to put everything on a good solid table, a good solid foundation. Then you find you get more and more reliable information, more reliable readings. So take the time that’s required to do the practice, maintain the practice, so that when you put it to use, you really do get useful insights. They really do cut through your suffering, in whatever shape or form it may take. That’s one of the important parts of the meditation. You make it yours. There are general principles that we apply in trying to understand things and trying to develop the mind. But you find that each of us will have particular ways of making ourselves suffer. This is why it’s the saying, “Happiness is an inside job.” Because you’re dealing with your own peculiar ways of making yourself suffer. And you’ll find, as you practice, meditation becomes your own as well. It becomes your way of dealing with your sufferings. So do your best to make the practice complete. Then you have a better chance of getting the complete results that you want.

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