Factors for Awakening

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Sometimes, when the Buddha explains the path, he talks about concentration coming before discernment. And sometimes he talks about discernment coming before concentration, like in the list of the five strengths. It starts with conviction, goes through mindfulness, concentration, and finally gets to discernment. That’s for one type of person who starts with conviction, and that’s enough to get them going, get the mind to settle down. For other people, though, conviction is not enough. They need to see things with their own eyes, prove things from their own experience, think things through on themselves. That’s the version of the path where the discernment has to come first, and in a way that leads to concentration. For example, in the seven factors for awakening, it starts with mindfulness, as we’ve been discussing for the past couple of days. Staying focused on the body and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed, distress, with reference to the world. So we work on that. We find that other things come up in the mind, and there’s a strong temptation to go with them. We need to have good reasons for not going with them. The Buddha recommends that we use the next factor, which is analysis of qualities. In other words, you analyze the qualities of your thinking to see whether it’s skillful or not. In terms of the qualities here, that means you’re not focused so much on the content of what you’re thinking. You’re focusing on where does this thought come from, what kind of force in the mind, what kind of motivation in the mind is leading you to think in these ways. The Buddha himself said that when he guided God on the path, or the first step on the path, when he realized he’d finally found the right path, it was when he’d learned how to divide his thoughts into two sorts. There were thoughts that led to harm for himself or others, or both. And then there were thoughts that didn’t lead to harm. In other words, he looked at his thoughts as part of a causal process to see where they’re coming from, where they’re going. And he noticed that the thoughts that led to harm came from sensuality, came from ill will, came from the desire to do harm. Whereas the thoughts that led to no harm were ones that came from renunciation, non-ill will, i.e., good will, and harmlessness and compassion. So focusing on where the thoughts came from and where they led, then he was able to see that the first kinds of thoughts were really not worth thinking about. None of those are what the content was. The motivation was going to cause harm. So why get involved? It’s this way. He was able to step out of his thoughts. A lot of us have a problem stepping out of our thoughts. We talked today about the mind being a committee. Some people claim, “I don’t see a committee. I just see one person in there.” What that means is you’re stepping into every thought that comes in. You’re not willing to step back and look at the thought from the outside. When you look at it from the outside, you can see where it’s coming from, where it’s going. You have a much better idea of whether it’s worth thinking or not. If you see something is going to be harmful, why think it? Even if something looks harmless, you have to ask yourself several questions about it before you continue with the thought. One, is this true? And if it’s harmless, it should be true. Is it really beneficial? That’s the next question. Because some things are true, but they don’t really benefit anything. Why think them? Then, if it’s beneficial, the next question is, is this the right time and place? There are some thoughts that would be perfectly fine to think when you’re at a job or at home, but here you’re out meditating. There are some thoughts that will be concerned with what you’re doing in the meditation. Those are perfectly fine. Those are true and beneficial and timely. So those are the thoughts you can think. So when you’ve learned how to sort through your thoughts in this way, that gives you an idea for the next factor of awakening, which is persistence. In other words, the effort you put into getting rid of the unskillful ones and encouraging the skillful ones. This requires that you be motivated, and this is what the analysis of qualities does. It helps motivate you so you have the desire to let go of unskillful things. Otherwise, we tend to side with them. Greed comes along, and we like our greed. Anger comes along, sensual desire comes along, and we tend to like these things. We side with them. But if you begin to think, these are not really true friends. They’re false friends. They whisper in your ear, and they let you, that kind of person who whispers in your ear, say, “Let’s go do something against the law.” And then you go and do something against the law. And the police come, and that person runs away. You’re left getting caught. So how can you regard these thoughts as your friend? If you think in these ways, you’ll find that it’s easier and easier to be willing to pull out of unskillful thoughts and try to encourage skillful ones in the mind. This ultimately will get you back to the breath, with a sense of wanting to be here. It’s not like you’re being forced or doing it just because you’re told. You see that there’s really good reason to be here. When you’re with the breath, with a sense of it’s good to be here, that’s when the possibility of rapture arises. Now, the word “rapture” in English can be fairly strong. Sometimes what this is talking about is not so much rapture as just a sense of refreshment. It feels good being here. You feel refreshed being with the breath. That sense of refreshment gives you a sense of nourishment. When the mind is nourished, that leads to the next factor of awakening, which is calm. The mind calms down. It’s like your body. When it’s well-fed, you’re willing to rest. When you’ve been fed with a sense of refreshment with the breath, the mind will settle down and be happy to be right here. Then you put down roots. In other words, you spread that sense of well-being throughout the body, and then you get your sense of awareness to fill the body. You’re best to keep it filled. The body filled with awareness. The body filled with breath. This goes from beyond calm. It goes into concentration, when the mind is solidly based. Its intention is firm. Its intent is firm right here. Your awareness fills the body. Breath fills the body. As you learn how to maintain this, you find that the mind is less likely to get knocked off course. When you can maintain this longer, that gives rise to a sense of equanimity. You’re no longer concerned about the refreshment or the sense of ease. The equanimity itself is easeful, but it’s much more refined than an ordinary sense of pleasure. The mind is just impassive. It’s here and it’s solid. The breath gets more and more refined until it finally gets still. Then you learn how to maintain that. It’s at this point when people will often say, “Well, what’s next?” Well, this is what’s next. Learning how to not just do this, but also how to maintain it. The mind will come up with all kinds of reasons why it wants to think about this or do that, and you say, “Nope, not now. We’re working on a new skill, which is to stay here with a sense of really solid well-being.” It’s like being a hunter. You can’t make an arrangement with a rabbit that it’s going to come at a certain time. You have to go out, find the place where the rabbits tend to be, and sit there very quietly but very alert. Quiet so that you don’t disturb the rabbit, alert so you know when the rabbits come. And then you just have to maintain that, to be ready at any time. It’s the same with this. You can’t make up your mind beforehand that you’re going to get this insight or that you’re going to have to deal with that defilement. But you do know you need to be fully here for when they come. So you practice that. If you want, you can work with the elements in the body as we explained today. In other words, focus first on the warmth in the body. The warmth in the body, which is fire. The coolness in the body, which is water. The solidity of the body, which is earth. In each case, you find the point in the body where that particular sensation is most prominent, and then you focus in there. Then you think of it spreading out to fill the body. Like tonight, it’s a little cool, so it’d be good to focus on the fire element. Wherever it’s warmest in your body, focus there. It’ll allow that sense of warmth to spread. If it feels like it’s too much, again, then you can focus on water. It’s cool. Find the cool spot in the body, focus on that. With earth, you focus on the parts that feel solid. So there’s a sense that you’re really solidly here. Then you try to find a balance among all these things. Breath and earth are one continuum, so you want to find something that’s not too light, not too heavy. Water and fire are another continuum. Find the spot that’s not too hot, not too cold, just like Goldilocks. Then you focus on maintaining that sense of balance. What you’ve learned here is an important lesson about how perception can shape your experience of the present moment, both your experience of the body and the state of your mind. It’s in this way that you learn how to use your concentration to develop some insight into the powers of the mind, especially the mind’s power to shape its experience in the present. You’ve got lots of choices where you’re going to focus, how you’re going to focus. In some cases, you’ll see the results immediately. So this is how concentration leads to discernment. We started with the discernment that led to concentration, and then the concentration leads to discernment. The two help each other a lot. It’s by working together that they strengthen each other. They turn from just ordinary concentration and ordinary discernment to something that’s really special. They really can create a revolution in the mind in how it looks at things and how it experiences things. It shows you where you’ve been causing unnecessary stress for yourself and how you can learn how to stop. Because you begin to see the power of a concentrated mind, the power of perception and feeling, in shaping your mind. So try to develop these qualities together. Sometimes concentration will come first and discernment will come after. Sometimes it’s the discernment that comes first and the concentration that comes after. It doesn’t matter which comes first. What’s important is you learn how to bring them together, because that’s when they both develop strength.

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