Factors for Awakening

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You’ve probably heard that bird that goes flying around at night. It does that so that it doesn’t run into things. It’s kind of like sonar. It sends out the sound waves, and then it gets the reflections coming back. When it hears something coming back, it knows, “Don’t go there. Don’t go there.” That’s its way of having a sense of where it is and what it should be doing. That’s what mindfulness does for us. Mindfulness is not, as you’ve often heard, just accepting awareness or non-reactive awareness. It’s a quality of your memory. You want to remember what you’re doing here. You keep reminding yourself. It’s active memory. It’s not wandering around. It’s not wandering around in thoughts of the past. It’s bringing what you’ve learned from the past to bear in the present moment in a way that’s helpful. So for the time being, all you have to remember is that you want to stay with the breath. And anything you’ve learned about staying with the breath that’s helpful right now, keep that in mind too. That’s it. Just keep reminding yourself. This is one of the reasons why they use the meditation word so often when you get started out. Buto means awake. It’s the quality of mind we’re looking for. Actually, it’s what the Buddha called himself. Someone asked him, “Are you a human being? Are you a deva?” And he said, “Nope, nope, nope. I’m awake.” That’s the quality we’re after here. Alert, awake, clear about what you’re doing. Use that word, buto, with the in-breath, to-with-the-out-as, as a kind of reminder. Because it’s so easy to forget, our awareness, our attention, actually, comes in moments. And if you don’t remind yourself to stay with one object, it’s very easy to drop it and totally forget where you were. You can try an experiment. Think about where were your thoughts for the past hour? Can you trace them all? Where was the train of your thought going? And you realize it wasn’t one single train of thought. It was lots of different trains. There’s a train going from New York City up to Boston, and all of a sudden you find yourself out in the middle of Nevada, taking a train across to San Francisco, and then another train going across Canada, or a train going down South America. The trains of thought don’t connect. And it’s so easy to forget between one moment to the next if you don’t make up your mind that you really want to stay here. It’s not just a matter of being with one object. You also have to have a singleness of will right now, that you really want to stay here with the object. And the mindfulness helps. It reminds you not to go away, not to forget your original intention. That’s the quality of the Buddhist that is useful in all situations. Then as you’re settling down with the breath, you’ve got to check the state of mind. How much energy are you putting in right now? How much energy do you have to put in? Sometimes you’ve got lots of excess energy. You’re thinking all over the place. Your mind is like a ping pong ball bouncing around. You want to give it a little bit more mass, a little bit more solidity, so it can settle down. Other times you’re feeling kind of sluggish. It’s the end of the day. In that case, you need to give yourself a little extra energy. Energizing factors, the Buddha said, are analysis of qualities, persistence, and rapture. The analysis of qualities here means looking at your state of mind to figure out what’s skillful and what’s not, and trying to encourage the skillful qualities. It’s that ability to ask a few questions about what’s going on in your mind. That’s what wakes you up. Otherwise you just slide into some old thought habits. You’re not really observant. You’re not really concerned about where you’re going. This is just where you’re used to being. You’ve got to get yourself out of those ruts. You have to ask yourself, “Where is this leading?” That’s what the questions about skillful and unskillful really come down to. Is this leading someplace you want to go, or is it not? What kind of pleasure is it leading to? Is it leading to long-term pleasure or short-term? We’re here for the long-term. You can find short-term pleasure anyplace. You can just walk down the street, and there’ll be little pleasures you can buy here and there. But that’s not what we want. We want something that’s more solid, something more lasting. And that kind of pleasure has to come from the skills you develop in the mind. And we are working on a skill here. Think back to any manual skills. Think about the qualities of mind you needed to bring to it. You had to, on the one hand, listen to the instructions and put them into practice. But then you also had to observe what you were doing, and then learn from your own actions. Another question today about causality. The Buddhist teachings on causality, even though they may sound complex, are very commonsensical. They’re the kinds of beliefs about causality that anybody would develop if they’ve mastered a skill. In other words, your actions make a difference. You can learn from your past mistakes. Sometimes you made a mistake in the past, and you can correct for it. Other times you have to work around it. That’s when you’re a carpenter and you’re planing some wood. And in some cases you plane and things go well, and then you make a big dash and you can’t go and put the wood back on. That means you’ve got to back up a little bit and change your approach. What are you going to do now so that the dash is not a blemish on the piece that you were working on? You may have to redesign the piece or else throw the wood out. The problem is, with your life and your mind, you can’t throw it out. You’ve got to work around any long-term, long-lasting results of your actions. But you always have that choice in the present moment. What’s the most skillful thing to do now? It’s learning how to read the situation and have the trust that your actions now do really make a difference. So look at what your actions are, and particularly your actions in your mind. Where are they going right now? They’re going to make a difference. In what direction are they pulling you in? When you ask this question, it gets you more interested. It raises your level of energy. Then you stick with trying to develop your skill. If you do it right, especially when you’re working with the breath, the mind will begin to settle down and there’ll be a sense of rapture that comes up. “Refreshment” may be a better translation. The term bhitti is the term in Pali. There’s a sense of refreshment that comes just being right here, breathing in, breathing out, nothing really restricting you, nothing hassling you. All you have to do is sit here and breathe, and you can breathe any way you want. Think of the parts of the torso that could use a little exercise by participating in the breathing. All this can energize you. Because that sense of refreshment that comes from meditation, that’s your food. It gives you the strength to keep on going. Now there are times when you’ve got too much energy, a lot of frenetic energy. There are different ways of dealing with that. The classical ways are trying to get the mind more calm, more concentrated, more equanimous. How do you do that? One way is actually to use that excess energy. If you’re going to be thinking, think about the breath, the different ways you breathe, how you feel the breathing, places where you could be focusing your attention. Most people usually start at the tip of the nose or maybe the center of the chest. But how’s the breath energy doing in the other parts of the body? This is when you begin to sense it. When we talk about breath energy, it’s just kind of your sense of energy flowing in the body. And that can flow anywhere in the body. You might want to take some time to look around. Your hands, your feet, your legs, your arms move in from the outside. Or else move from the inside out. Just get a sense of where the breathing energy is good and where it’s not so good. Where are you holding on to tension in your body that you can relax without slumping over? In other words, give yourself something to think about. As long as you’re going to be thinking, think about something here in the present moment. That way, your thinking can lasso you in and bring you into the breath. Get the mind concentrated. As for developing equanimity, that chant we had just now about all beings are the owners of their actions, it’s meant to make you reflect on the fact that there are a lot of things in the world you can’t change. Sometimes our restless thoughts about things we’re upset about, “This person did that, that person did this,” is the situation out there in the world, and it’s a real mess right now. You can get yourself all worked up here. But for the time being, you don’t need that. In fact, you need to give the mind a chance to rest. Otherwise, if it can’t rest, it’s not going to be able to handle things well. Like a motor that you just keep running and running and running and you don’t add any lubricant, you don’t look after it. After a while, it begins to run down. Or like a knife that you keep using to chop, chop, chop things and you never have sharp enough to sharpen the knife. It gets dull. The mind needs its own time to be by itself, to gather its strength inside. In times like this, you have to put everything outside, off to one side. Keep it outside, don’t bring it in. So you realize there’s only so much you can do in the world, and a lot of people out there are doing all kinds of things in line with what they want to do, and you can’t stop them. That’s just the way the world is. We like to think that we can find a safe place out there in the world, but there are none. The only safe place is here inside. You can develop a good, strong sense of being centered inside, mindful, alert, and really trust that true well-being comes from within. It doesn’t have to come from outside. Then you’re leaving fewer things outside. That can be threatened by changes in the world. This allows you to put aside your concern with things outside for the moment and say, “The real work has to be done here inside.” Because of course things outside are going to be good, and they’re going to be bad, and then they’re going to be good again, because back and forth, this is the way they are. There are passages in the Canon where the Buddha has the monks reflect on the fact that if nothing else happens, there could be a breakdown in society, the sangha, the monastic order could split. In times like that, it’s going to be really hard to practice. Those things haven’t happened yet, so use your opportunity now to practice. And even if those things don’t happen, you’ve got the issues of aging, illness, and death. We carry these issues around with us all the time. Are you prepared for dealing with them when they come? If the answer is that you’re not ready to go yet, you’ve got work to do inside. You’ve got to put down your concerns about other things outside, because this is the big issue inside, how you handle these things. And if you don’t handle them well, there’s going to be long-term suffering. So if there’s some other issue that’s grabbed your attention right now, you’ve got to develop equanimity toward it. Then realize that right here is where you want to be. So if you’re thinking about things outside, bend your thinking in a way so it leads you back inside. In this way, your focus here in the present moment can get some equilibrium. Not too little energy, not too much energy, enough energy to keep going and to keep using your mindfulness to stitch those moments of attention together, to remind yourself, “This is why you’re here. This is work to be done inside.” The very first step in the work is to get the mind anchored in the present moment. It’s your safe spot. Years back, when I was learning Thai boxing, I was attracted to it because I liked the idea of being able to kick. But that wasn’t the first thing they taught you. The first thing they taught you was how to get out of a clinch, how to back off, how to find your safe spot. This is what concentration is. It’s backing off from things to find your safe spot so that when things either outside or inside get difficult and you’re not sure how to deal with them, you’ve got a place to retreat to. So you can gather your strength and not come out swinging. But come out with a better attitude and come out more prepared for dealing with things outside, because you’ve developed this strength within. You begin to wake up a little bit to what’s going on in your own mind, and you can put it into shape. These factors that I just mentioned, the factors of mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, equanimity, are called factors for awakening. These are the factors that help us develop that quality of buttho. Awake, alert, clear about what you’re doing, clear about how to do it in a way that doesn’t cause anyone any harm, clear about doing it in a way that leads to true happiness. So use these qualities, use this list of qualities to take stock of your mind. Do what you can to bring things into balance, and you’ll find that the meditation goes a lot more smoothly and you have more solid results to show for it.

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