Factors for Stream Entry

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The Buddha describes four factors for stream-entering, the first taste of awakening. And when you look at the list, you realize that the basic factors for any serious practice—and so whether you’re aiming at stream-entry or not—it’s good to know these factors because they underlie all the practice, any kind of practice. The first factor is associating with people of integrity. How do you recognize people of integrity? The Buddha gives a couple tests. One is that it requires that you be with that person for a while, so you get to see the person in action. Notice, would he ever tell anyone to do something that would not be in that person’s best interest? And two, would he ever claim to know things that he doesn’t really know? If the person passes the test, he may be a person of integrity. Because in other qualities, you have to have some integrity yourself in order to recognize it in other people. This is why the Buddha set his prerequisites for a student, someone who is truthful and observant. You try to be observant, both of yourself and of the teacher, and you try to be truthful to yourself and to the teacher. Because whatever is coming up in your mind, whatever problems you have, you’re not embarrassed to talk about them. You don’t claim things that you haven’t attained. So having some integrity is a basis for recognizing it in other people. The principle that crooked people can’t recognize people who are honest because they’re assuming everybody’s crooked takes someone who’s honest. They get a sense of who’s honest out there. Once you’ve found someone of integrity, then you listen to the true Dhamma from that person. And again, the Buddha gives some tests for recognizing true Dhamma. The most important is, when you put it into practice, what kind of qualities does it give rise to in the mind? Does it give rise to greed, aversion, and delusion? Then there’s something wrong. If it makes you difficult to maintain, if it makes you burdensome on other people, that’s something wrong. You look for a Dhamma that gives you good reasons to behave in skillful ways. Then we’ve heard the Dhamma that the next factor is appropriate attention. This is where you have to put a lot of effort. Appropriate attention means basically looking at things in terms of the four Noble Truths, seeing how whatever teaching you’ve learned from the Dhamma applies to the problem of suffering in your life. Where are you suffering? And what are you doing to cause that suffering? Notice that’s the question. What are you doing? We don’t blame the suffering on things outside or people outside. We look for it within ourselves. We look for the cause within ourselves. Then we figure out what we can do to practice so we can then abandon the cause. That’s always the question you should bring to any particular teaching. How does this apply to understanding suffering and putting an end to it? There’s a passage where the Buddha said, “All I teach is suffering and the end of suffering.” Some people say, “Well, that’s not the case. He also teaches about levels of rebirth and all kinds of other things. He teaches about karma.” Well, of course, all of these things are relevant to the question of suffering. As I said, birth is suffering. If there’s only one birth and you’ve already had it, then there wouldn’t be any reason to talk about it. But the thing is, we keep on taking birth. There are all kinds of levels we can go to, and some of them are pretty horrendous. Some of them are pretty good, but they don’t last forever. And it’s good to know this. It’s good motivation for the practice, the Buddha said, when you realize that all beings everywhere, no matter what level they’re on, they’re subject to aging, illness, and death. When you think about that, no matter where you go, whatever level in the cosmos, there’s going to be aging, illness, and death. In some places it’s more subtle, in some places it’s more obvious, but it’s always going to be there. The Buddha said, “When you reflect on this, that gives rise to the path.” In other words, a sense of saṃvega comes, realizing that you really do want to get out of all this, no matter how good it is. So when you see someone, even here just on the human level, living a really comfortable life, lots of wealth, you don’t get jealous for them. You don’t say, “I wish I could have that.” You realize that even if you had that, there’d still be suffering. So everything the Buddha taught is relevant to the question of what is suffering, what’s causing it, and what you can do to put an end to it. And if you see each of the teachings as something that plays a role in answering these questions, then you understand what those teachings are for. The Buddha didn’t set out a cosmology just for the sake of having a cosmology. He didn’t analyze craving just because it was interesting. The analysis is there to help you understand what’s going on in your mind right now. The worldview is there to spur you on to realize you’ve got to get out of worlds entirely. So that’s the motivation to take the teachings and really take them to heart, seeing how they apply specifically to this big problem inside you, the suffering you’re causing for yourself. If we were suffering for ourselves, we wouldn’t be causing suffering for others. We wouldn’t be oppressing others. We live in a world where everybody has to eat living beings of some kind, even if it’s just plants. But we have to depend on the labor of the farmers who plant the plants. And farming is not a pleasant occupation. It’s not an easy occupation. So you realize this world that we live in is just eating, eating, eating. This is what defines us. We feed both physically and mentally. The question is, is there a way out? When you think in those terms, that gives rise to dispassion. And that leads to the fourth factor, practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. As the texts say, that means practicing for the sake of dispassion. It also means bending yourself to the Dhamma, not bending the Dhamma to fit your likes and dislikes. You realize that the Dhamma places demands. Those four noble truths have duties, and some of them involve quite a lot of work. And you’re willing to put in the effort. Because you want something better than just another world to go to. So you use your understanding of the Right View and you apply it to the mind, trying to develop the concentration, the mindfulness, and all the other factors you need so that you can really see into the mind clearly. Use your Right View to look at all the other views that would pull you away. And you learn how to take them apart. Anything that would pull you off the path, you learn to see that this is inconstant, stressful, not-self, not worthy of claiming. So you put all the things that would take you off the path aside. The real trick is when it comes to the point where you have to put the path aside. Even for a stream-enterer, there has to be a moment where you just drop everything. Ananda Bendiga, who was a treasurer on Savatthi, was not a very busy man, but he had become a stream-enterer. One time he was visiting a group of adherents of other sects, and they wanted to know from him, “What does the Buddha teach?” They asked him what the Buddha’s views were, and here he was, a stream-enterer. “Well, how about the monks? What about them? What are their views?” “Well, I don’t know the entirety of their views either.” “Well, how about you? What are your views?” “I’d be happy to tell you my views, but first you tell me yours.” And so they go down the list of all the big issues that day. The world is eternal. The world is not eternal. It’s finite. It’s infinite. The body and the life force are the same thing. They’re something separate. An awakened person after death either exists or doesn’t exist, or both, or both. Those are the hot issues of the day. And Ananda Bendiga points out that if you hold on to any of those things, those things are inconstant, stressful, put-together, fabricated. And therefore, if you hold on to them, you’re going to hold on to stress. So they asked him, “What’s your view?” He said, “I see that whatever is fabricated is worthy of seeing as not me, not mine.” He said, “In that case, then you’re holding that view and you’re holding on to stress.” “I use that view to take other views apart and also to take it apart.” The right view is the only view that can transcend itself in this way. And it’s in transcending the path that you attain stream-entry. The path itself is what gets you there. And then you have to put it aside. Even though you hold on to it for the time being, there does come a point where you have to let it go. But you let it go, not because it’s failed you, but because it’s served you well. The Buddhist image, of course, is the raft going across the river. You need the raft to get across the river, but when you’re on the other side, then you can put it aside. You don’t have to carry it around in your head. So these are things that are worth thinking about, regardless of whether you’re thinking about practicing for the sake of stream-entry or not. Practicing to get the mind in good shape, well, it needs these four qualities associated with the right people so that you can hear the true Dhamma and get good examples for how the Dhammas lived. And then use appropriate attention to apply it to your big problem in life as the suffering you’re causing yourself. And you’re thorough in how you do this. You realize that you really do want to put an end to suffering. You really do want to find a happiness that’s secure. So you’re careful not to fall for anything less. That’s the part that often makes it hard, because it’s so easy to fall for other things. You say, “I’ve got a nice practice. It makes me calm. It keeps me from going crazy in this crazy world.” And a lot of people will stop right there. It’s the people who realize that there’s more, there’s better, and they don’t want to settle for second best. Those are the people who go far. Of course, this is a choice that we make. But here the Buddha’s giving you the tools for making a good choice. [silence]

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