

Factors for Awakening

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As I mentioned the other night, in all the lists of the wings to awakening that mention mindfulness and concentration, mindfulness always comes before concentration. And I've mentioned many times that the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness are basically his instructions on how you get the mind into concentration. You start out ardent, alert, and mindful, focused, say, on the breath in and of itself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. When you do that really well, you get the mind into the four jhanas.

The list called the factors for awakening basically goes into the steps on how you get from right mindfulness to right concentration, up through the fourth jhana. Starting with mindfulness, the next step is analysis of qualities. You look into the mind to see what's skillful and what's not. This is what's meant by analysis of qualities: You're trying to detect what's skillful and what's not. As you combine this factor with mindfulness, you're approaching mindfulness as a skill. You're specifically looking for what you're doing that's skillful, what's not skillful, and what you can do to take what's not skillful and make it more skillful.

Actually following through with that is the next factor, persistence.

When you're with the breath, what kind of breathing is easy to focus on? What feels good for the body, and what's right for the mind? You have to take both sides into consideration—both body and mind—because sometimes very subtle breathing may feel good for the body, it's relaxing, but if it's too subtle for the mind to follow, you're going to have problems. You can start drifting off. So you have to check it out: What are the needs of body and what are the needs of the mind? How can you meet them so that they'll be willing to stay together?

Seeing this distinction is analysis of qualities, which is the wisdom faculty in the factors for awakening. You're bringing right view to bear on your mindfulness practice. With persistence, you're bringing right effort. You don't just sit there and watch skillful things coming and going or unskillful things coming and going. If you discern that something is unskillful, you try to make it go away faster. If something skillful is not there, you try to give rise to it, and then you prevent it from going away.

Now, as you do this properly with the breath as you're settling down, a sense of rapture or refreshment will arise. That's the next of the factors for awakening: a sense of energy, a sense of fullness, a sense of "just rightness" being right here. There are some exercises by which you can induce it. Focus on a part of the body

that's especially sensitive to the difference between the in-breath and the out-breath. Your hands might be a good candidate. Watch them as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Notice if, when you're breathing out, you squeeze any of the tiny muscles in the hands. If you do, see if you can breathe out without squeezing them.

Another spot you might try this is in the area around the sternum—any place in the body where you're sensitive to squeezes in the energy flow. You find that when you don't squeeze the energy, even on the out breath, a sense of fullness begins to develop. That's going to be the beginning of rapture. Very carefully breathe in a way that doesn't disturb that sense of fullness, and then you can let it spread.

In some cases, when the mind settles down, the rapture will be more than just a sense of fullness. Charges of energy will go through the body. As long as that feels good, keep it up. After a while, though, it'll begin to feel tiresome. You want something calmer. That's the next factor for awakening: You calm things down. As the Buddha said, you calm the mind down and you calm the body down. It's from that sense of calm that's first been nourished by the energy and now has had enough: That's how you get the mind into concentration.

Here the Buddha says it can be either concentration with directed thought and evaluation or without. You're beginning to go through the stages of jhana until finally you arrive at the third and the fourth. It's at the fourth where equanimity becomes pure. That's the seventh factor for awakening.

So this is how you get from beginning mindfulness practice up to the fourth jhana. The steps involve insight or discernment into what's skillful and what's not skillful, along with persistence, the factor of right effort. You try to energize things before you calm them down, because as the Buddha points out, if you're starting out calm already and you emphasize more calm, you just put yourself to sleep. So wherever there's a need for energy, you provide it first, and then allow things to calm down. That way, the mind will be more balanced and stable.

Now, there are a couple of things worth noticing here. One is that the Buddha says that as you go through the factors for awakening, you develop them based on appropriate attention. What is appropriate attention? It's applying right view to what you're doing, asking yourself, "What am I doing that's skillful and what's not? What am I doing that's causing unnecessary stress and what can I do to stop it?" So this practice of going from mindfulness to concentration involves having discernment lead the way. In other words, you don't just sit here and let things happen on their own. You actively ask some questions to nudge the mind in the right direction, to nudge the breath in the right direction.

Another point worth noticing is that the equanimity you ultimately arrive at is not just ordinary, garden-variety equanimity. It's what the Buddha calls equanimity not of the flesh. You start out with equanimity of the flesh, which means keeping the mind calm in the face of whatever sensory input there is. This falls in with the Buddha's recommendations to Rahula: When you start out the meditation, try to make your mind like earth. Whatever happens, you're not going to be perturbed. From that act of will, you're able to develop the skill of seeing what's skillful and what's not. You need that solidity of mind first if you're going to see things clearly. Then, as you see things more and more clearly, you get to deeper and deeper stages of equanimity—and finally to the point where equanimity really is pure.

Often you hear that the practice of mindfulness is basically the same as developing equanimity. But usually what they're talking about is garden-variety of equanimity: simply not reacting. The Buddha wants you to develop something deeper than that, because the desire not to react is simply a matter of the will. As long as your willpower is up, you don't react. But then you slip. Your mindfulness slips. Other desires take over.

But if you can get to the state of concentration where equanimity is pure, it's a lot more solid because it's a lot more solidly based. You've been through rapture; you've been through calm. The breath-energy needs of the body have been met. The mind has been energized and then soothed, so its equanimity is a lot more stable. This is why, when the Buddha gained awakening, it was from the fourth jhāna. That's the state of mind where you can see things clearly.

Another point to notice about the factors for awakening is that they are factors *for* awakening. They're not descriptions of awakening itself; they're part of the path for the sake of awakening. We're not here to arrive at equanimity. Equanimity itself is part of the path leading to the deathless, which as the Buddha said is the ultimate happiness. This is why, when the Buddha explains the path in different ways, there are many places where he talks about how when you practice the four establishing of mindfulness, then the seven factors of awakening get fulfilled. Then when they're fulfilled, they lead to the goal: clear knowing and release.

Basically, as you're developing these factors for awakening, you're practicing mindfulness as it leads into concentration, the place where the concentration gets really settled—ready for the work for even more discernment.

So these are the stages by which it happens, and it's useful to keep these steps in mind.