

## *The Seven Factors for Awakening*

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One of the sets in the Wings to Awakening is the list of the factors for awakening. There are seven of them altogether. They start with mindfulness as a factor for awakening, then there's analysis of qualities, persistence or energy, rapture, tranquility or serenity, concentration, and equanimity. Of these factors, the Buddha said that mindfulness is the one that's always appropriate.

Mindfulness here means both mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Like right now: You're trying to keep the breath in mind. Then there's alertness, watching what the breath is doing and watching how the mind is relating to the breath. These two qualities, the Buddha said, are always appropriate. They're always skillful.

Then he goes on to describe how the rest of the factors for awakening depend on the situation. Three of them are energizing: There's analysis of qualities, which tries to figure out what exactly is skillful, what is unskillful, seeing things in terms of cause and effect, particularly seeing what you're doing in terms of cause and effect in the mind. There's persistence, which tries to nurture the skillful qualities and get rid of the unskillful ones, but also carries the sense of putting an effort into the practice whenever it is needed. There's rapture, in the sense of fullness that can come as the mind begins to settle down in a skillful way,

These are energizing and, as the Buddha said, if you find that you're already hyper as you come to the meditation, you may not want these qualities. But if you feel that there's a lack of energy in your practice, these are the ones you want to focus on, to help you see, when you're feeling lazy or just tired: What potentials for skillfulness are there in the mind? What can you focus on that'll give rise to energy?

Sometimes this means moving your focus around. If you find that just focusing on one spot in the body tends to make you sleepy, move your focus around. If the breath seems too light to focus on, make it heavier. In other words, you actively

work with what you've got to try to figure things out. That gives rise to a sense of rapture or refreshment. It wakes you up.

Then there are the other three qualities: serenity, concentration, and equanimity. The Buddha said that when your energy level is low, you don't want to focus on these. It's as if you've got a fire that's beginning to go out and you want to keep it going. But instead of keeping it going, you just pour a lot of ashes on top of it. That puts it out totally.

These three qualities are useful when you're feeling hyper. When there's too much energy in the mind, try to calm things down, do what you can to calm the breathing, do what you can to just stay in one spot, despite the temptation to keep moving around. In here, the factor that makes a difference in the mind is the ability to watch over things. That's equanimity.

There's another sutta where the Buddha talks about two ways of dealing with unskillful qualities in the mind. One is to actively work against them, and to promote skillful qualities in their stead; the other is just to watch. Some unskillful qualities will go away simply as you watch them. They've been able to take hold of the mind because you haven't been paying attention, but if you watch things with a steady gaze and don't react, that can take care of some unskillful qualities that arise in the mind.

So the trick, of course, lies in seeing what state your mind is in and which other qualities you need to emphasize.

This is where another quality associated with the factors for awakening comes in, and that's appropriate attention: looking at things in terms of cause and effect, noticing what you're doing that's causing stress in the mind and what you're doing that's helping to alleviate the stress; which factors of the path are working, which ones are not. Whenever mindfulness is combined with appropriate attention, that allows you to look at the mind and figure out what needs to be done.

So these three qualities are always essential: Mindfulness keeps something in mind, alertness, watches what's going on, and appropriate attention gives you a sense of what needs to be done. Mindfulness on its own doesn't know anything, what it should be mindful of, and what it shouldn't be mindful of. It's just a quality of the mind that keeps something in mind. You need to have a sense of the

overall picture of what we're working on here, so that you can know what's useful to be alert to, what's useful to keep in mind. Keep remembering that the issue is the fact that there is stress and suffering in life, and not only that there's stress and suffering, but also that the stress and suffering is caused. It comes from craving, which is really placing a burden on the mind. That's what you've got to focus on. Then there's a way to put an end to the craving. That's the noble eightfold path.

The concentration factors in the path are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These are the things you want to keep in mind. As you're watching the breath, as you're paying attention to what's going on in the present moment, remember that you're not here just as an observer. You've got an agenda. Oftentimes, mindfulness is presented as being a totally neutral practice. Now, mindfulness itself may be neutral, but what you're doing with it is not neutral. There's always a framework. And it's good to be clear on what that framework is, because otherwise, mindfulness gets pushed off in different directions. So always keep in mind the fact that we're here to deal with the issue of suffering, to see what we can do to put an end to suffering. The important causes are right here in the mind.

So from that perspective, you can look at the other factors for awakening to see what's appropriate right now. Is your mind suffering from too much energy or too little energy? Will it benefit from actively working to promote skillful qualities or actively to snuff out unskillful ones—or would it benefit more from just watching? This requires a sense of “just right,” along with an ability to watch things in terms of cause and effect to see what's working.

The Buddha said sometimes when we're practicing, we can practice as we like, live at our ease, and the practice is working. It's fine. But other times when we live at our ease, the practice doesn't work: The mind starts wandering into areas where it shouldn't go, like the monkey in the analogy that wanders off into an area where hunters also go. The hunters have left out little tar traps. The monkey goes wandering in, gets interested in a tar trap, and ends up getting stuck. The more it tries to pull away, the more stuck it gets.

So if you find that living at your ease leads the mind to start wandering around unskillful areas, that means you've got to make things a little bit more difficult for yourself. This is why we have the ascetic practices. This is why we have late-night

sits. This is where the element of making a vow in your meditation comes in: promising yourself that you're going to sit longer than you'd normally would; when you're going to walk, do walking meditation more than you normally would; you stay up later than you normally would, as a way of putting heat to the defilements.

This ability to see what's working and what's not working is really essential to the practice. It requires a lot of honesty. As the Buddha said, that was *the* main quality he was looking for in a student: that the student be honest. If the student is honest, observant, then you can work with that student. The student can be trained; you can rely on the student to notice what needs to be done and, in fact, to become his or her own teacher. So, value the quality of honesty in your mind as you watch what's working and what's not working in your practice.

Always work to keep these qualities going: mindfulness and alertness together with appropriate attention. That combination enables you to read the situation and offers ideas as to what might be the best way to approach whatever it may require.

Skillfulness is not just a matter of knowing which qualities are skillful, but also of knowing which ones are needed right now, and to what extent. As the Buddha points out in his discussion of the four bases for success, desire, if it's too strong or too weak, actually becomes unskillful. If it's just right, it's part of the path. The same principle applies to persistence, intentness, and your powers of analysis: If they get too carried away, they actually become unskillful; if they're too weak, they're unskillful. Skill lies in knowing what's just right.

"Just right" can also change when the situation changes, when the state of your mind changes, when the state of your body changes. That means you have to be on top of events. That's what the mindfulness and alertness are for.

These are the main points to keep in mind. Once you keep them in mind, you know the other tools you're going to have at your hands. You can apply the right tool for whatever the job needs to be done. That's right effort.