

Factors of Enlightenment

Dhamma Talk by Bhante Vimalaramsi

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... meditation and there's any sound that you're not expecting, what happens is you'll jump. And this jumping to me is a sign that your attention is very focused, but your mindfulness needs to sharpen a little bit more, and then you won't jump, when that occurs.

So tonight I wanted to talk a little bit about the enlightenment factors, because it seems that they're not real well understood sometimes. Everybody understands: "Yeah, there's seven of them and they're mystical, magical in some ways" but these are very practical aspects of learning how to direct your mind so that you have balance in your mind.

The first enlightenment factor is mindfulness. Mindfulness means your soft, interested, attention, in what's happening in the present moment. If your mind tends to grab onto something, then your mindfulness is the thing that notices that so you can let it go. There's nothing worth holding on to.

The next enlightenment factor is investigation of your experience. When you have a hindrance arise, something that keeps distracting your mind away, what you start to do is notice more and more little things about that distraction. You start to take an interest in how it

occurs. Why it occurs doesn't matter. How it occurs does. What happens first? You feel a little sadness comes up. How does that sadness arise? What happens first? What happens right after that? What happens after that? What happens after that? That's the enlightenment factor, of investigation, seeing what your experience is, and learning how it arises. Now the importance of this is, that when you learn how the experience arises, you're able to recognize it more quickly, and you start to let it go more easily.

The next enlightenment factor is energy. You can also put some enthusiasm with that too. When you're enthusiastically watching what's arising, your energy is good and balanced. If your energy becomes too strong, if you put too much effort in trying to make something happen in the way you want to, it will cause restlessness to arise, so you have to be a little bit careful with energy.

The next enlightenment factor is right in the middle of all of the enlightenment factors, and it's a balancing factor, and it's the factor of joy. Now the enlightenment factor of joy is all pervading joy. It's when joy arises and it just kind of bubbles out of everywhere. It's a very nice feeling. When it's strong, your eyes will open up, and you notice that, and you close them, and they open up again. You see a lot of Buddha images with the eyes open up and he's looking down. What the artist is really showing, although I don't think they notice that so much any more, what the artist is really showing is the enlightenment factor of joy. A lot of Buddha images, especially ones that I saw in Sri Lanka, have incredibly beautiful faces, and the face, when you look at it very closely, has joy in it. And that's what the artist is portraying, is that joyful feeling.

The next enlightenment factor is tranquility. That's a sense of openness and peacefulness, very, very calm, serene feeling.

The next, is one of the most misunderstood words in the Pāli language, they call it samādhi. Samādhi is always translated into English as concentration, and that's about as far away from the real translation as you can get. Sama means peaceful, calm. Dhī means wisdom. Samādhi is a calm kind of wisdom. It's a composed mind. It's a mind that's very intent on your object of meditation, but it's very composed, very much at ease, and calm. It doesn't waver away from your object, what ever that object happens to be.

The last enlightenment factor is equanimity. Equanimity means balance of mind. Now this is the highest feeling that you can experience. When the Buddha was talking about the many different kinds of feeling, he described five different kinds of feelings in one discourse, and they were: unpleasant physical feeling; pleasant physical feeling; unpleasant mental feeling, that's emotion; and pleasant mental feeling; and, equanimity. Now, as you continue on with your practice, every time you let go of a distraction, every time you let go of a pain, of a sensation, of an emotional feeling, you're starting to develop more and more equanimity. That's the balance of mind. And this is very necessary for the practice of meditation. If your mindfulness is not real good, your equanimity is not very good. If your mindfulness isn't sharp, your equanimity will disappear. The equanimity is the balance of seeing things the way they truly are without trying to make them anything other than they are. An emotional feeling arises: "Ok, that's an emotional feeling. Let it be." Whose feeling is it? Did you ask it to come up? No. The equanimity is the factor that helps mind stay in balance so it doesn't become attached.

Now these different factors of enlightenment are real important, while you're sitting in meditation. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta makes quite a big deal of the seven factors of enlightenment as part of the dhammānupassanā. And how do you use these things? When your

mind is dull, and there's sleepiness in your mind, then you have to call up your mindfulness factor, you have to be able to investigate how that dullness arises, and the more interest you have, the more energy you have. When you finally have that balance of mind where there's enough energy and the sleepiness and dullness go away, joy will arise, all by itself. If you start to put a little bit too much energy into your meditation practice, you can cause your mind to get very restless, and with that restless feeling, it's an unpleasant feeling. There's some dislike, and feeling of your mind is really active, very thoughty. The way you overcome the restless feeling is by focusing your mind on tranquility, and composure, having calmness in your mind, and as you do that, you will start to get more and more equanimity arising. Now as you go higher in your meditation, as you go deeper into your meditation, you will start to become more and more sensitive to the amounts of energy that you need to keep a good balance, especially if you get up into the arūpa jhānas, it becomes very, very fine. If you don't have quite enough energy, your mind will get dull. If you have just a little bit too much energy, your mind gets restless. So you get to learn more and more finely tuned consciousness, and the way you develop that is through the enlightenment factors. The more alert your mind becomes, the more you really notice the kinds of energy you need to keep to sustain the feeling of equanimity, of peacefulness, of calm.

Now there's a lot of descriptions in the suttas about all of the different stages of jhāna. Jhāna meaning meditation stages or levels. In every jhāna, there is some degree of equanimity, of mental balance. It's not as strong in the early jhānas, in the first jhāna or the second jhāna. You start to see it a little bit more in the third jhāna, and you see it very strongly in the fourth jhāna.

I just got through reading a book a little while ago and they were talking about meditation, and it was a Westerner that was talking about visiting Sri Lanka, and Thailand, both, and learning meditation. And he got the idea from the monks in both Thailand and Sri Lanka,

that, experiencing the jhāna was not for laymen, that was for monks only. And that's really wrong view. I mean that's it's ridiculous.

As you sit in meditation, and you start to open and relax your mind more and more and more, there'll come a time when a hindrance will arise, dislike or dissatisfaction, or strong desire for something, or dullness, or restlessness, or doubt, whatever. Now these hindrances are very important. They're an important aspect of the meditation, because these are the things that cause us so much pain in our everyday life. When a hindrance arises, we have this false view, that this thought, these feelings, are mine: "I am that." And this is where our attachment is. So what do you do when a hindrance arises? You start letting go and relaxing, coming back to your object of meditation, relaxing some more. And you'll bounce back and forth for a little while until you finally start to let go of that hindrance, and the hindrance gets a little weaker, and a little weaker as time goes by, and finally when the hindrance goes, when it doesn't even arise any more, there's a very, very strong feeling of relief, and joy arises. After the joy is there, then the feeling of very strong comfortableness in the body and in the mind, both. You feel very balanced in your mind. You feel very peaceful and very calm, very centered. I just described to you the first jhāna. This is something that can happen for anyone, if they practice, and don't add anything new or subtract any part of the meditation. It really does work, it works very fast, very easily.

During the time of the Buddha, Well, let's put it this way. When I was in Sri Lanka, I was talking to some monks and they said: "If you want to experience jhāna, it's going to take you at least ten years practice, very intensive." And I started realizing that if the Buddha would be teaching ignorant Indian farmers, I mean they were ignorant because they didn't have much learning, and they were successful with their practice, why is it that twenty five hundred years later it takes ten years of very intense practice? And the answer is very simple.

There's two different kinds of meditation. One kind is one-pointed absorption concentration, and that does take a long time to develop. The other kind of meditation is the tranquility meditation. And what's the difference between the two practices? That one extra step of tranquilizing your bodily formation. On the in-breath relax. On the out-breath, relax. Distraction is there, let go, relax. You're continually opening mind up, and calming mind, all the time. And as a result, your progress is fairly quick with this kind of meditation. Doesn't take very long.

But over the years, and through the use of a lot of different commentaries, the meditation is changed away from the suttas, and it's gone to the commentaries, and the commentaries have been influenced very heavily by other ideas, and other ways of meditation, in particular, the Visuddhimagga. It's one of the most horrible books written, because it's written in such a way that it's intellectually very stimulating, and it uses just enough parts of suttas to make it sound like it really does know what it's talking about. But when you compare the Visuddhimagga with the sutta itself, you'll start to see that there are definite differences. In the mindfulness of breathing sutta, it talks about tranquilizing your bodily formation. In the Visuddhimagga, it ignores that completely. Completely.

So you have the Visuddhimagga teaching one kind of meditation, that doesn't lead to nibbāna, and you have the sutta, that teaches another kind of meditation, and it leads directly to nibbāna. And now, because we're so far away from the time of the Buddha, there's a lot of monks that take the Visuddhimagga as the same as the teaching of the Buddha, and then there's other monks that don't take that as the teaching of the Buddha, they take the suttas as the true teaching. And you have all of these intellectual games that are starting to occur more and more.

But the thing that's most important, is to follow the practice as closely as you can, and when you do, you'll start to see when you practice the tranquility meditation, it fits in perfectly with all the descriptions in the suttas of what the Buddha was talking about. Fits very well.

When you practice by way of the Visuddhimagga, you start to see that the suttas don't make much sense, because it doesn't match the experience. The Visuddhimagga says before you get into the first jhāna, you have to get into what he calls upacāra-samādhi, which is access concentration, or neighborhood concentration, and when that occurs, then you have this light, or this disk appear in your mind, and it's called a nimitta, and you have the nimitta and you let go of the breath and you just pay attention to the nimitta.

But that's not the instructions in the sutta. So, what we have to do is start to realize more and more that we have to let go of commentaries, and just go back to the original teaching. There's not a mention of the nimittas in any of the Anāpānasati Sutta, not at all. Part of the Anāpānasati Sutta has the four foundations of mindfulness in it, and that doesn't mention nimitta, at all, but because of the popularity of those commentary, there's a lot of confusion that's happening.

I practiced the way of the Visuddhimagga for twenty years before I started to realize that what it was talking about, wasn't right. And when I finally let it go and started going to the sutta and investigating and then practicing the way the sutta teaches, I saw major difference in the practice, and as I was starting to teach more and more, I started seeing the progress in the meditation with the students, really become fast. In a short period of time, it's very

possible for a person that's, practices every day, to get into a jhāna. Doesn't take that long. So this is an important aspect, and it kind of agrees with the way that the Buddha was teaching twenty five hundred years ago, because he was working with people that were not well educated, and if they didn't see some kind of progress, they would have let it go. They wouldn't have continued. But because of the way the Buddha taught, many people had great benefit, from this practice, getting into the jhānas, and eventually attaining nibbāna. It's not impossible.

Another thing that I run across in both Thailand and Sri Lanka, is the monks think that that's an impossible thing and they tell the laymen that it's impossible to attain nibāna in this lifetime, so why even try? But I'm here to tell you it's not impossible. If you continue with the practice in a systematic way, and follow instructions that are in the suttas, nibāna can occur, for anyone, and it really honestly doesn't take that long.

Ok, so, I'm going to cut this talk a little bit short, because I know that you're going to go to leave, and you have to go back to Sri Lanka and all, so.

Let's share some merit.

May suffering ones, be suffering free

And the fear struck, fearless be

May the grieving shed all grief

And may all beings find relief.

May all beings share this merit that we have thus acquired

For the acquisition of all kinds of happiness.

May beings inhabiting space and earth

Devas and nagas of mighty power

Share this merit of ours.

May they long protect the Buddha's dispensation.

Sadhu . . . Sadhu . . . Sadhu . . .

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