

March 20, 2010

All day silent retreat at the Zen Center

Seven Factors of Awakening

This list is a lovely list. It is a list of the seven things that are necessary for our awakening up from the habits of our conditioned mind. And we are only responsible for the first two. The other five will automatically follow. The other five come about spontaneously from the practice itself, and will then reinforce the practice.

This is the list of the qualities of our mind and heart, the seven factors of awakening:

1. mindfulness
2. investigation
3. energy
4. joy
5. tranquility or calm
6. concentration
7. equanimity

First we must develop a discipline of practice, which, as you know, can be hard won. But we must hold steady to the practice even though we protest heartedly. We are restless. We are agitated. Anxiety can come up about certain things in their predictable ways. We can be bored. We can be overcome with doubt or laziness. These are the normal stumbling blocks. We expect these things to arise. But do know that inner changes come automatically with the development of the discipline. And here we are, practicing our discipline. This time is a gift we have given our selves and each other.

So what are these seven factors? What are we doing here? What is at the heart of this discipline?

The first is mindfulness. We are paying attention in the present. We are training ourselves to have the presence of mind to attend to what is happening in this moment. And attention can be like food. Our attention feeds the object. If we are focused on anxiety as if that were everything, then we feed the anxiety. If we stay with the breath, we feed the capacity to attend to the breath. If we attend with a striving determination to the breath, we feed the quality of striving determination. The attitude and the object are reinforced by the attention.

So, the second important quality is that of investigation, or curiosity. What is this experience? What is the nature of this distraction—this sleepiness, this doubt, this desire to run out of the room screaming? What is the nature of this pain? I am curious to know how it feels, how it functions, what proceeds it, what follows it. Not analytically, but in the awareness of this moment and this phenomenon. What is this? Looking closely. Seeing, feeling, hearing with great interest.

From this mindful curiosity arises energy. With more curiosity there is more energy of engagement. There is a flow of interest to attending.

With the increased energy, there follows naturally a delight which comes with absorption. Joy arises out of full engagement.

With this joy comes tranquility and calm. There is penetration, concentration, a settled, unified focus.

With tranquility and concentration comes equanimity. We are no longer pushed around by events. Equanimity is derived from a larger view, a bigger picture of events within a broader context. We have an overlook which develops out of the practice.

As we sit here, the only discipline we are practicing is paying attention with curiosity. This helps soften the mind to let go of any fixed, small view, of any clinging to any one notion. It allows all phenomena and perspectives and derived truths to be transient.

We don't have to feign or demand or even expect tranquility or joy, but once we have the experience of the way they naturally arise, we know something we previously did not know. These naturally arising factors support our practice. We talk about it now to help us begin to notice them when they arise. Sometimes they are very quiet, very subtle or so unusual, we don't even notice them. We talk about them so we can recognize them as they appear, and make room for them.

We can feel what it feels like to be open with interest and have a point of contrast for when we are constricted, and judgmentally reactive. Then we can begin to choose that which contributes to a sense of wholesomeness. When we cultivate mindful curiosity we can begin to take responsibility for our own well being.