

Seven Factors of Awakening Dharma Practice Days 2018-19

Insight Meditation Center, Redwood City, CA

Practices and Reflections: Energy (viriyā)

Week 1

Reflection: In general, do you find that you have enough energy for what is important in your life? Do you spend most of your energy on activities that seem to be the most urgent or the most important or impactful?

Practices: At the end of each day, reflect on when you felt energized and when you felt depleted during the day. Is there a consistency to the rhythm of your energy levels on most days. If possible, experiment with meditating at different times in the day.

Week 2

Reflection: How do you know when you are energized? How is feeling energized different than feeling restless?

Practices: Spend more time than you normally would doing activities that energize you. Notice how your body feels when you feel energized. Also notice your mind state and emotional state when you feel energized. Were the energizing activities indeed energizing?

Week 3

Reflection: How easy is it for you to stay with a task until it is completed? What do you do when there are obstacles or difficulties in your path? Do you have the persistence to overcome them? Do you work on tasks past a point of diminishing returns?

Practices: This week decide to complete a task that you have been intending to accomplish, but have not. Notice your energy level when you think about doing this task, when you're just about to begin doing the task, while you're doing the task and after you've completed the task. When did you feel the most energetic? Which step required the most energy? How might this affect your practice?

Week 4

Reflection: During meditation, do you find that you are applying a lot of effort and striving or are you primarily relaxing? How can you tell whether you are applying the right amount of effort to your meditation?

Practices: During this week, experiment with applying more effort in meditation. This can be done physically by sitting up straighter or by doing brisk walking meditation before sitting. It can be done mentally by putting more effort into being alert and mindful of what is happening during the meditation. If applying more effort agitates you, try to match the increased effort with increased calm or inner stillness.

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Practices and Reflections: Equanimity (Upekkha)

Week 1: Equanimity as inner balance and seeing the bigger picture

Reflection: Can you remember a time in your life when you felt present, poised and balanced while in the midst of some exciting or difficult activity? Or can you remember a time in your life when you felt very present for what was happening and yet able to also see the bigger picture of what was occurring? How did it feel to not be caught up and lost in the activity, yet to still experience it? How did it feel in your body?

Practice: During your daily meditation practice, see if you can notice any feelings of poise, balance and evenness. If you don't experience a sense of balance, then explore what prevents you from being present and feeling equanimous with what has arisen.

Week 2: Equanimity compared to indifference

Reflection: Some practitioners may be put off by their ideas of equanimity, fearing that it asks us to have a cool aloofness and indifference to our experience and the world around us. What are your ideas about equanimity? How do you distinguish it from indifference or dry neutrality?

Practice: When you find yourself in a challenging situation apply yourself to be mindful of your body. Give attention to your posture and assume a posture which is well grounded and balanced. Explore how a dedication to being mindful of body and posture helps you to be equanimous.

Week 3: Equanimity as a Factor of Awakening

Reflection: In the list of the Seven Factors of Awakening equanimity is last, after concentration. Why do you think this is? Do you experience a relationship between concentration and equanimity? How might these factors contribute to your spiritual development?

Practice: During your meditation practice notice when you feel calm and settled, then notice how balanced and poised you feel when you're calm. Also notice the relationship between feeling agitated and your ability to hold experiences with equanimity.

Practices and Reflections: Investigation (dhamma vicaya)

Week 1: Investigation as looking more closely. The awakening factor of investigation can manifest as looking more closely and more deeply at elements of our experience. Please choose one predominate object during a meditation period this week, and consciously use mindfulness to "investigate" in this way.

In some stretch of relative calm, simply let awareness answer the question "what's happening now?" The "answer" may be a sensation like the breath, or an emotion or mind state, or any other experience. Then, just as we practiced in the paired coached investigations, become your own investigation coach and let mindfulness respond to a few follow up questions. In and of itself, what is the experience of this like? Can I see more details? How do I know this is happening right now?

Does your perception of the experience change in some way? Does the factor of investigation affect the strength of the mindfulness?

Week 2: Investigation as distinguishing and discerning. As we discussed, investigation can help us tease apart the strands of experience to distinguish between states more accurately ("oh, this is not anger, but sadness") as well as to discern what skillful, wholesome, and helpful, what is the path to freedom and what is not the path. If mindfulness helps us to see we have many more choices than we might realize, investigation gives us a dharmic basis for choosing.

This week notice moments of internal choice as simple as what to think about or how to respond to someone and consciously reflect using the question, "what would be helpful right now?" After a choice is made, keep looking and ask "is this helping? helping to free the heart or entangle it in more suffering?"

Week 3: Investigation as inquiry and spiritual questioning. Suzuki Roshi talked about dharma practice as a process of finding one's "inmost request", the deepest question in one's heart. Spiritual practice can be understood as a response to our sincere questioning. Who am I? What is truth? What is happiness? The questions may be more important than any answers we generate conceptually.

Reflect on the questions that have brought you to dharma practice and animated your quest. How have they changed over time? Right now, what is your "inmost request"? What would it mean to live this question?

Week 4: Investigation as integrating the dharma becoming unoffendable.

Investigation can help us illuminate the places in our lives where the light of the dharma has not yet reached. How can we discover and work with our own blind spots and let them teach us and awaken us?

We spoke about the intention of becoming "unoffendable", so at ease, transparent, and undefended that we aren't taking things so personally. One practice toward this end is to simply notice the times this week when we take offense, when our buttons get pushed, when expectations get disappointed. Investigate these! How does investigation illuminate clinging? Does it help to change the energetic dynamic?

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Practices and Reflections: Joy (pīti)

Week 1

Reflection: What helps you feel ease, contentment or joy? What are the activities that most easily bring you joy? Are you more likely to feel joy when you are with others or when you are alone? Do you experience joy that seems independent of any particular activity? How easy is it for you to be in touch with the sources for your joy?

Practice: At the end of each day reflect on when you felt the greatest sense of well-being, joy or contentment. What patterns do you notice about when joy arises?

Week 2

Reflection: How do you know when you have a sense of well-being or joy? How is feeling joyful different than feeling ill-at-ease or uncomfortable? What effects does joy have on you?

Practice: Spend more time than you normally would with activities that support a feeling of well-being or joy. Notice how your body feels when you feel content or satisfied.

Week 3

Reflection: During meditation, do you find that contentment or joy arises? What are some of the different flavors of joy that arise?

Practice: Just before meditating, reflect on those aspects or people that inspire your dharma practice. In the course of your meditation, notice any feelings of joy, well-being or pleasure that occurs. Be sensitive to the physical sensations that come with the joy. Allow yourself to enjoy those feelings. Gently and patiently, let those feelings grow as you continue your meditation. Use that joy as a way of letting go into the moment.

Week 4

Reflection: How is your sense of well-being when you are completely present in the moment? Is it always joyous – or does it depend? Is suffering what takes you out of the present moment – or is being out of the present moment what causes suffering – or both?

Practice: During this week, experiment with doing one short simple daily task with committed mindfulness (for example, washing dishes). Notice how this impacts your contentment or well-being during or after the activity.

Note: with all these reflections and practice, don't feel pressure to experience the 'correct' Buddhist answer – see what truly arises. Wishing you a sweet month!

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Practices and Reflections: Mindfulness (sati)

Week 1

Reflection & Practices: In the development of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Jon Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness “The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” At an experiential level, in what ways does this definition work well – and in what ways might you amend that definition?

During this week, use your practice to investigate the nature of mindfulness. How would you define mindfulness?

Week 2

Reflection & Practices: Mindfulness is conditioned by other factors. What supports the arising of mindfulness in your daily life? What factors erode mindfulness? Experiment with behaviors that support the arising of mindfulness.

Week 3

Reflection & Practices: In the seven factors of awakening, mindfulness is said to be the ‘balancing’ factor between the three arousing factors (investigation, energy, rapture) and the three calming factors (tranquility, concentration, equanimity). How does mindfulness function as a balancing factor in your practice?

Week 4

Reflection & Practices: Mindfulness is said to co-arise with other wholesome factors of mind. Do you notice that mindfulness brings other wholesome qualities in its wake? What is the relationship between mindfulness and wisdom? Is there such a thing as wise mindfulness and unwise mindfulness? Does mindfulness ever feel unwholesome or unproductive?

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Practices and Reflections: Unification of Mind/ Concentration (samādhi)

Week 1

Reflection: Can you remember a time in your life when you felt really present, composed, calm and absorbed? This may not have occurred during a meditation session, but perhaps when you were in nature or perhaps waking up after a very satisfying sleep, for example. How did it feel to be calm and absorbed? How did it feel in your body? How was your mind state?

Practice: During your daily meditation practice, see if you can evoke the feeling you had earlier in your life of being really present, composed, calm and absorbed. You can use that feeling to guide your meditation by noticing when you feel more composed and less composed and the conditions preceding it.

Week 2

Reflection: It is difficult to become concentrated or absorbed when our minds are filled with the hindrances of (1) sensual desire, (2) ill will, (3) sloth and torpor, (4) restlessness and worry, or (5) doubt. What is your relationship to the hindrances? Are you aware when they are present? What is your attitude towards them? Is one hindrance more persistent than the others?

Practice: This week notice when the hindrances are present and take the opportunity to investigate them. What is their experiential flavor? What is the difference in your experience when any particular hindrance is present and not present?

Week 3

Reflection: During which daily activities do you notice that your mind is gathered? During which activities do you find that the attention is fractured?

Practice: Select an activity when your mind tends to be gathered and unified – and deliberately invest some additional energy to focus deeply. Do this for only 5 minutes – but really give yourself over to that activity for those 5 minutes.

Week 4

Reflection: Do you intentionally cultivate one form of meditation or do you allow your meditation practice to unfold organically? Do you have a preference for open awareness insight practice or focused concentration practice? Do you have any hesitation around becoming concentrated or entering deeper states of samadhi?

Practice: For this week, intentionally do concentration practices during meditation. This can be done by choosing to ignore other stimuli and focusing on your breath. It can be helpful to count your breaths from one to ten repeatedly. You can even make mental notes out loud to support the noting. Alternatively, you might use Brahmavihara phrases and pour all the awareness into each phrase.

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Practices and Reflections: Tranquility (passaddhi)

Week 1

Reflection: What helps you feel tranquil? What are the activities that most easily bring you a sense of tranquility? Is it some kind of physical activity? Do you generally feel more peaceful indoors or outdoors? Are you more likely to feel tranquil when you are with others or when you are alone? When you're with others, do you feel more tranquil while talking or listening?

Practice: At the end of each day, reflect on when you felt the most peaceful. Reflect on (and perhaps write down) the conditions that supported that feeling and then reflect on the conditions that disrupted that feeling.

Week 2

Reflection: How does it feel to be tranquil? What is the feeling in your body? How is your mind state when you're tranquil? How is feeling tranquil different than feeling "spacey" or complacent?

Practice: Spend more time than you normally would with activities that support a feeling of calmness or peacefulness. Notice how your body feels when you feel peaceful or relaxed. Also notice your mind state and emotional state when you have this feeling. Is the feeling of tranquility consistent or does it fluctuate?

Week 3

Reflection: Please come up with a list of easy ways that you can increase the frequency and amount of calmness during your daily life. What are some of the easy ways you can avail yourself of more serenity? Are there activities or situations in your life that detract from your sense of calmness that can be easily minimized?

Practice: This week, spend more time than you normally would doing activities that support a sense of calmness or peacefulness. Notice how you feel before, during and after the activities. Notice how your meditation practice is affected by your degree of calmness. Also notice how your meditation practice affects your peacefulness in daily life.

Week 4

Reflection: During meditation do you find that tranquility or calmness arises? Do you value your meditation sessions based on the amount of calmness you experienced?

Practice: During your meditation practice notice if you feel calm or tranquil. Notice whether you feel attached to the calm feeling. Also notice if you feel agitated or restless. Can you calmly note the agitation?