

Investigation  
by Rebecca Dixon  
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For years I've heard and read about the Seven Factors of Awakening. I practice with them and I've given several talks about them. It's clear to me that they're important for achieving Awakening.

For this talk, I wanted to delve more into how they *work* because I know a lot of people think Awakening is some remote goal they'll never reach. They might well ask, "What have the Seven Factors done for me lately?"

So I did some research and came up with two suttas that talk about the daily life benefits of the Seven Factors of Awakening. In one, [SN 46.14] the Buddha visits a monk whom he knows has been in pain, and asks if he's feeling better. The monk says nope, uh uh. Still feeling miserable.

So the Buddha encourages him to practice with the Seven Factors of Awakening, saying "when cultivated and developed," this teaching leads to "full realization, perfect wisdom, to Nibbana." Well yes, I thought as I read that, we know that part, but this guy's in pain right now...

But then I read on, where after the Buddha' tutorial, the sick monk "rose from that illness. There and then that ailment ... vanished." Oh great, I thought, now we're like some religious sects that pray their illnesses away, and refuse any medical treatment.

Then it struck me. This is MY story about how I established a regular meditation practice. About 30 years ago, soon after I was diagnosed with a neurological disease that involves a lot of full-body pain, a friend took me to meditate at Berkeley Zen Center.

The first time I meditated at home after that, I saw that my pain became manageable. It was a great relief and it motivated me to keep practicing. It still does. At that point I knew nothing about the Seven Factors, but just derailing my usual self-centered train of thought did better than the pills the doctor was giving me.

There's another sutta that hits close to ground zero. It's *the Buddha* who's down with a "grievous illness." One of the senior monks recited to Him the Factors of Awakening and His serious illness "vanished." A modern commentator noted that the mind and body are not separate, and "unwholesome and harmful thoughts... can cause disaster." When concentrated

on “right understanding,” he went on, “the mind can be a powerful influence for healing.”  
[Piyadassi Thera, 2006]

Now before you put the Seven Factors away, up on the top shelf of your medicine cabinet – at least until your next grievous illness – let’s remember that happiness is the goal for *all beings*. There are just different notions of how to get there.

I presume you’re listening to or reading this talk because you think meditation, and the Buddhist teachings, might help you get there. We should bear in mind that the Buddhist teachings serve as a how-to manual *for our practice*. They’re not about esoteric concepts we need to learn. They’re about ways to *practice*, even if at first glance they seem totally abstract.

If you went to my website, RebeccaDixon.org, and listened to the 20-minute talk I gave almost three years ago, you probably have an idea what the Seven Factors are. It may help to remember that the number one Factor, which enables us to use the next six, is Mindfulness. Those six Factors are divided into three energizing and three calming factors.

Investigation, Energy and Joy *empower* us to delve into the causes of suffering, or happiness. We are *calmed* by Serenity, Concentration and Equanimity. When the mind is still it absorbs better what we learn from engaging with the dharma *experientially*. So, we need to be energetic for that engagement, and then let a still mind digest it.

I want to focus on one of these 6 factors, the first of the energizing Factors. It’s Investigation, and it’s fairly representative of what the Seven Factors of Awakening are about. Investigation is about *paying attention*. I often urge meditators to ‘notice’ this or that, which means turn the attention toward these phenomena, or be alert for them to arise in the mind.

Mindfulness practice is not passive, even though we start out using concentration to quiet the mind. Once the mind stops bombarding us with trivial or repetitive thinking, those thoughts that carry a heavy emotional load will reveal themselves and the emotions they carry. That’s what we should investigate.

You’re completely justified in asking, “Well, *how* are we supposed to investigate them?” Isn’t meditation supposed to be free of thoughts? Well, the answer is a little Yes and mostly No. Meditation should be *more free* of the trivial, repetitive ones, yes. But there definitely are kinds of mental activity that we should use to investigate strong thoughts and emotions that arise.

We want to investigate by paying attention to the *experience* of having these thoughts. Generally, this means wondering how these mind states cause the mind and body to *feel*. Techniques to investigate our experience range from quiet contemplation to mentally asking questions. The most common question is, “What is this,” but I’ll talk about others in a minute.

Contemplation reminds me of letting a candy melt on the tongue. We just hold the thought and our questions about it gently, at arm’s length, and let it reveal its subtle content. It’s also a bit like Hamlet asking questions of “poor Yorick” – a skull he has found in the graveyard.

Being merely a skull, Yorick is slow to reply, so most people want to get ahead of him and figure out the answers themselves. That’s not the appropriate *kind* of thinking. The process needs to be less mentally active. Our intellects don’t have – and can’t generate – the kind of answers we’re seeking.

There is a subtle element of analysis involved in this Factor of Investigation. It comes into play in identifying cause and effect, but particularly in choosing the question, or concern, to be examined. This analysis may observe that an insistent thought is accompanied by feelings of – for example – dissatisfaction and anger. The thought certainly seems to *cause* those feelings.

When we notice this, we’re tempted to analyze who was wrong in making us feel this way. This is not the kind of analysis we should pursue. Investigation, as I’ve said, relies on how attention is focused. That’s what the suttas call *Appropriate Attention*.

The Buddha addressed what made attention appropriate in the Sabbasava Sutta, on “all the products of the mind.” He said often the “uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person... doesn't discern what ideas are fit for attention, or what ideas are unfit for attention. ... “

I’ll paraphrase the way the Buddha said such people attend inappropriately. They wonder:

Do I exist? Do I not exist? What am I? How is it I exist?  
 Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?  
 Did I exist in the past?  
 What was I in the past?  
 How did I exist in the past?  
 Will I exist in the future?  
 How shall I exist in the future?  
 What will I be in the future?

In other words, most people are paying attention to thoughts about me, me, me and I, me and mine throughout time and space. This leads to convoluted questions about self. The sutta quotes the untrained person:

“This very self of mine — the knower that is sensitive here and there to the ripening of good and bad actions — [this] is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity.”

The Buddha said: “This is called a thicket of views, ... a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from stress.” [§218] Just so we’re clear, stress, as used here, means dukkha, or suffering.

So, that is not the appropriate way to investigate our internal experience, our thoughts and emotions. The sutta goes on to say that in contrast to those who don’t meditate, “The well-taught disciple of the noble ones... discerns what ideas are fit for attention, and what ideas are unfit for attention. He attends appropriately, ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress.’ ”

That last sentence recaps the Four Noble Truths: 1) Life is usually full of suffering, 2) dukkha is caused by clinging, 3) it can be ended, and 4) the way to end it is the Eightfold Path. So what does this tell us about Appropriate Attention? When in doubt, how do we know if the way we’re Investigating our internal experience uses Appropriate Attention, or not?

Well, in a nutshell, it depends on whether our Investigation is concerned with dukkha and ending our suffering, or if it’s all tied up with concerns centered around ourselves. Isn’t that what our brains work on most of the time: scattered concerns orbiting around ourselves? That mental activity is not the Investigation that’s intended in the Seven Factors of Awakening.

Dukkha, by the way, isn’t ours. We think of suffering as belonging to us, being a part of who we are. In some ways it can dent and twist us into different personalities, especially if we view it this way. It really helps to recognize that *all beings* suffer. Dukkha is not an element of our being, but an experience that arises and passes away for all sentient beings, and belongs to no one.

So now, when a big, insistent thought seizes your attention during meditation (or in daily life), take the time to see how it’s effecting you. Does it have an emotional impact? Investigate that. Hold it like a candy on your tongue, or like Yorick’s skull in your outstretched hand.

As I said before, Investigation is not about figuring things out intellectually. We just lead our attention to explore, guided by the Four Noble Truths, and ask: “Is this mental state one that involves suffering? If so, what is its cause, can it be ended, and *how* can it be ended?”

We want to be sure not to analyze it rationally, but experientially. We ask, “what is the felt sense of this thought and the dukkha it causes?” *How*, in other words, does it make me *feel*?

Many people are afraid to feel dukkha, so they avoid this vital part of Investigation. It may be uncomfortable at first, but it’s really the same suffering that we experience even without being aware of it.

It will lurk in the back of our minds, and if we don’t examine it and thus root it out, it goes on growing. It becomes an ongoing, though maybe low-level, torment for us, and it will continue to warp our perceptions and understanding of our experience.

In contrast, like an abscessed tooth we take to the dentist, although it may hurt to have them root around and release the discharge, once we have done the same sort of thing with the dukkha we experience, the pain soon subsides and the infection heals.

I should note that some of the powerful thoughts you have may be delightful. They’re also worth exploring and savoring, definitely. Just look, though, to see if there’s any clinging to that delight, or whether you’re prepared for it to pass away.

I want to end with a quote by the great teacher, Ajahn Chah, from his book, “A Still Forest Pool.”

Try to be mindful, and let things take their natural course.  
 Then your mind will become still in any surroundings,  
     like a clear forest pool.  
 All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool,  
     and you will clearly see the nature of all things.  
 You will see many *strange*, and wonderful things come and go,  
     but *you* will be *still*.  
 This is the happiness of the Buddha.

This happiness is not a far-off, future ideal. It’s part of our lives here and now, when we are mindful.

Thank you.