

Inquiry – A Factor of Awakening

Inquiry is the second of the seven factors of awakening. Inquiry is intimately connected to the first and third factors: mindfulness and energy. Inquiry illuminates like a light, bringing alive the detail and texture of our experience. It can be diffuse like a floodlight - showing the big picture, or intense like a spotlight - focused and deeply penetrating.

What is inquiry? Inquiry is sometimes translated from the suttas as the 'discrimination of phenomena'. In other words, inquiry is the conscious act of examining what is arising in awareness, by connecting with it and seeing clearly into its fundamental nature. In inquiry, we are probing to understand the essence of present experience without filtering or assuming anything, without bringing in personal biases. If we achieve this unmediated understanding we simply see 'what is' in a non-dual way.

So, how do we know when to inquire deeper, when some misperception remains to be explored? When anything drawing our attention has a strong sense of permanence and appears to be solid; or when we feel pulled toward the past or the future – here a view around 'self' and 'other' has been formed: a view likely to give rise to suffering at some stage. The mind develops a sticky quality and perhaps we feel the presence of one of the hindrances – desire or aversion, sluggishness or restlessness, or doubt. When we observe this we can inquire further into the seemingly solid view or concept, to unravel the knots of attachment and ignorance thereby reducing the potential for suffering.

Inquiry shows us what things are not. It cuts through the veil of appearances, simplifying what is before us so that instead of being captured by forms, feelings, perceptions, volitional formations, or consciousness – in other words, the aggregates – we realise the underlying character of things: impermanence, suffering and 'not self'.

Mindfulness is like the lens for this light of inquiry: it sharpens or diffuses. Energy is like the battery, the source of power. Mindfulness supports inquiry that then promotes energy. Likewise, energy powers mindfulness - which, in turn, guides inquiry. With the spirit of inquiry being the interest aspect, these three together – mindfulness, inquiry, energy – enhance the quality of our attention and the strength of our awareness. They co-arise in meditation and similarly come together when we apply ourselves fully to some daily task.

Whether in meditation or going about our lives, ideally, we are interested, involved and present. In our daily tasks we learn, become skilled and more knowledgeable. In meditation we are drawn still deeper: instead of mere learning, wisdom grows as inquiry cultivates the ground of insight. Here, however, we are moving beyond our everyday perceptions to a clearer understanding - probing 'just this'. So instead of concentrating on one worldly task, we open to inquire into whatever is arising, using all our mindfulness and energy. The focus and trajectory of our inquiry will move with life's flow - sometimes radically, e.g. when investigating a persistent thought, the question suddenly becomes 'who is irritated anyway?'. But the aim of inquiry is always to go deeper into what is before us: to develop a wiser and more holistic union with the object of attention.

Beneficial as this inquiring quality of mind is, it seems hard to sustain in daily life because of hurry, distraction and forgetfulness. In meditation, we have the opportunity to establish a continuing inquiry and explore its power more easily. We begin by first taking time to settle the mind and develop some concentration: the Samatha aspect of practice. Then we bring attention to what is happening, using inquiry as a stimulant for insight: the Vipassana aspect. Sometimes, as we all know, it is very difficult to bring focus to the monkey mind - but with persistence we can hone our interest and settle into the inquiry process.

True inquiry is not judgmental. It has a quality of natural open awareness, allowing and encouraging the truth to emerge, while - with a minimum of gentle and mindful guidance - holding the mind's tendency of proliferation in check. Now, as clarity of seeing develops, the mind settles and concentrates, further enabling yet deeper inquiry.

Inquiry can develop a sustaining momentum of its own. Spontaneously, acute interest in exploring any arising phenomena occurs with little or no holding in the mind to any feature of the flow of our experience. Ease (Rapture) and peace of mind blossom - as does trust in the inquiry process.

Now, as the meditation and inquiry get deeper, the mind becomes more refined and subtle. Thinking and 'story' subside as insightful understanding emerges. As meditation is mindfully continued so-called distractions and stories are inquired into, seen for what they are, and simply accommodated as further experiencing. The inquiring mind finds interest and peace whilst investigating these difficult subjects too.

Mindfulness, inquiry and energy bring a natural arising of the other factors of awakening. Inquiry has the affect of making all things interesting. In meditation, as inquiry strengthens, preoccupations with 'me' and 'mine' simultaneously fall away. When fully engaged, inquiry is non-dual; there is no 'me' doing the inquiring into. Inquiry reveals the presence of the other factors of awakening as a chain of connection and interdependence. A linkage can be traced from mindfulness to equanimity: Mindfulness – remembering to stay present – evolves seamlessly into inquiry – what is present? The keen interest of inquiry is then a catalyst for rising energy (right effort) and on it goes.

Often inquiry is narrowly viewed to be an inner wrestling with some deep spiritual question like 'who or what am I?', however the inquiry process itself is not special. Perhaps we see it more obviously on retreats but the spirit of inquiry is present as we apply ourselves to everyday living: it is a product of our engagement.

The big questions are valuable. They can trigger powerful insights into the underlying nature of both the question and the questioner. They can also facilitate a break-through into a realm of understanding beyond the everyday. Powerful, exalted states of mind are beautiful and uplifting - however they tend to be temporary, dependent upon conditions and, unfortunately, these states are prone to tenacious clinging by the mind. Yet, these same transcendent experiences have a more subtle and lasting affect: they empower and

strengthen our commitment to practice. They dispel doubt and can enliven a fearless inquiry.

It is inquiry into the little things, the everyday moment-to-moment, that chips away at conditioning, slowly melting ignorance and delusion. Over time, understanding is transformed at a fundamental level and in a more lasting way that is not so dependent upon conditions.

Inquiring into the nuts and bolts of living, leaving no stone unturned, takes both resolve and vigilance. As in meditation we must be prepared to begin anew: probing deeper - into more subtle, and often more uncomfortable - layers of experience.

Here, inquiry becomes a dynamic process: ever seeking the depths, the essential. It is, by its nature, alive and fresh – a limitless delving into the truth of ‘simply this’. With mindfulness, inquiry can be transformed into an abiding curiosity about the real nature of every facet of our lived experience. Life is invigorated and filled with colour, less self-obsessed and certainly not boring – though if boredom is the flavour of the moment, this too can be inquired into!

Through inquiry into the essence of this ‘such-ness’ of being, we can fully untangle the self-made web of misunderstanding and learn how the mind attempts to deny or to perpetuate an experience. We glimpse how the concept of ‘I’ arises and subsides. We begin to see what ‘real’ means, and how the overlays of the mind are constructed. Inquiry is the deconstruction of that which persists. It is to reverse our habit of ‘I-making’ and pursue a course of discarding whatever obscures our true nature.

Inquiry can be cultivated along with the other factors of awakening, offering its soothing and clear perspective in all of life’s circumstances. Choosing to engage through mindfulness and inquiry rather than defaulting to an automatic reaction is not always easy, but it can be intensely interesting and freeing; the space it creates can lighten the heart and fill it with gratitude.

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