



## 43 – Overview: The Seven Supports

### **Advanced navigational aids and optimal operating conditions**

*“Freedom is not the absence of commitments, but the ability to choose – and commit myself to – what is best for me.” ~ Paulo Coelho*

*“When developed and cultivated, the seven factors of awakening lead to direct knowledge and liberation.” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)*

### **Operating in the ‘Land of Perpetual Dawn’**

Having navigated the perilous waters of the Five Hazards (Chapters 37–42), we now enter the calmer waters of the Freedom stage of our journey. We enter a metaphorical space we’ve called the ‘Land of Perpetual Dawn’. Here, the task shifts from the heavy lifting of survival – bailing water, plugging leaks and avoiding the jagged reefs – to the subtler art of navigation. We are no longer struggling simply to stay afloat; we are learning to sail with skill and ease. This is not our final destination, but it's a land where we learn to cultivate and solidify an embodied response to the ‘Hazards’ (on and off the cushion), as and when they emerge from the fog before us.

### **From ‘Defenders’ to ‘Support: From stabilising to sailing**

In the previous ‘Abandon’ stage of our journey, we relied on the ‘Five Defenders’ (Chapters 28–33). These are the steadying inner capacities that help us stay afloat when the waters are rough – when craving, aversion, and reactivity surge and we need stability, courage, and clear-seeing.

In this Freedom stage, we introduce the ‘Seven Supports’, traditionally known as the Seven Factors of Awakening. These are not tools for battling experience but are the healthy operating conditions that emerge when hindrances loosen and clarity emerges. When cultivated, these Seven Supports function like an inner immune system: strengthening resilience and balance, so the old pathogens of compulsion find less foothold. In the RAFT metaphor, we might say the raft has moved beyond emergency survival and into open-water navigation. To continue our long crossing toward the Safe Shore, we need a more refined way to read conditions and keep the vessel trimmed. The Seven Supports are our raft’s integrated

instrument panel and rigging adjustments: they help us monitor the inner weather, correct course early, and stay balanced. Where the Hazards pull us toward sirens, storms, fog, whirlpools, or a spinning compass, the Supports help us adjust effort, attention, and equilibrium – so the journey becomes steadier, wiser, and increasingly self-sustaining.

## **The anatomy of the Supports**

The Seven Supports form a precise balancing system, coordinated by ‘Liberating Mindfulness’. Each element has a clear function: one monitors conditions, three restore energy and clarity when the body/mind is dull, and three restore stability and steadiness when the body/mind is over-aroused.

### **★ The Balancing Factor**

- **Liberating Mindfulness** (Chapter 44): Notices early shifts in inner conditions and coordinates the response. It registers what is happening without immediately reacting, then selects the most appropriate support to restore balance. It is the captain and lookout, scanning conditions and calling the right adjustment early.

### **★ The Power Triad:** Used when the body/mind is ‘Tuning Out’ (Chapter 40), dull, sluggish, or disengaging.

- **Penetrating Inquiry** (Chapter 45): Re-engages curiosity and clarity by investigating experience directly: “What is happening right now?” It interrupts automaticity and helps re-orient attention to reality rather than habit. It is the chart-work, restoring bearings when clarity has faded.
- **Enthusiasm / Courageous Energy** (Chapter 46): Mobilises engagement. It counteracts collapse and avoidance, restoring the willingness to stay present and act without forcing or strain. It is the wind in the sails, bringing drive back when we have lost momentum.
- **Energising Joy** (Chapter 47): Provides wholesome uplift that sustains attention. Not stimulation or excitement, but a quiet gladness that makes practice viable and encourages continued engagement. It is the lift of a favourable current, lightening the crossing and sustaining movement.

★ **The Ballast Triad:** Used when the body/mind is ‘Anxious or Agitated’ (Chapter 41), restless, reactive, or over-driven.

- **Deep Calm** (Chapter 48): Settles the nervous system and cools reactivity. It softens bodily tension and reduces agitation so the mind can stabilise. It is the smoothing of the waters, cooling the swell of reactivity.
- **A Unified Mind / Concentration** (Chapter 49): Gathers attention into a coherent whole, reducing fragmentation and overwhelm. It stabilises focus so the mind is less pulled around by competing stimuli. It is the steady rudder, helping the mind hold its line.
- **Balancing Equanimity** (Chapter 50): Maintains steadiness amid changing experience – pleasant/unpleasant, gain/loss – without being pushed or pulled into reactivity. It is an engaged presence, not indifference. It is the keel, keeping us upright through cross-currents.

### **The cascade of awakening**

While we use these factors to balance specific states, they also tend to unfold as a natural causal sequence. This isn’t a rigid ladder or a guarantee, but a common pattern we can recognise as the body/mind becomes less entangled in craving, aversion, and confusion. As the Hazards loosen, the Supports often gather momentum in a recognisable way – each one making space for the next.

1. ‘Liberating Mindfulness’ sees clearly.
2. Because we see clearly, ‘Penetrating Inquiry’ arises.
3. Investigation sparks interest and ‘Enthusiasm’.
4. When ‘Enthusiasm’ flows without friction, it lifts into ‘Energising Joy’.
5. When the body/mind is uplifted, the system settles into ‘Deep Calm’.
6. A calmer body/mind becomes stable, establishing ‘A Unified Mind’.
7. From this stability, the body/mind meets experience with ‘Balanced Equanimity’.

This is a description of how ‘Freedom’ feels from the inside: as reactivity quietens, clarity, ease, and steadiness begin to organise the mind naturally.

### **The ‘Pivot of Freedom’: from fighting to feeding**

The *pivot* that opens the door to Freedom in this chapter is a simple shift: from *fighting* what is unhelpful to *cultivating what supports* well-being.

In the ‘Abandon’ stage, our energy is understandably protective. We learn to recognise greed and hatred early and stop them from steering the raft. But we cannot make the long crossing by staying in *emergency mode*. In the ‘Freedom’ stage, our energy becomes more creative and forward-moving. We are no longer defined only by what we are trying to avoid (craving, aversions and compulsions), but by what we are learning to inhabit – clarity, joy, calm, and steadiness.

### **The pivot mechanism: Appropriate Attention**

How do we make this shift? We use the mechanism of ‘Appropriate Attention’ (*Yoniso Manasikāra*). It rests on a simple principle: what we feed grows; what we starve withers.

- ★ The Seven Supports are strengthened by turning attention toward the conditions that nourish them – curiosity, engagement, gladness, calm, and balance.
- ★ The Five Hazards, by contrast, are weakened when we withdraw the attention that fuels their stories and rehearsals.

The work is not to fight the darkness, but to keep trimming the sails toward the light – feeding what supports freedom, until it becomes the body/mind’s more natural way of travelling.

### **How to practice: monitor, adjust, and feed**

The practice in this stage is simple, but subtle.

1. **Subtle navigation:** We don’t force particular states; we *incline* the mind through small, timely adjustments – like trimming a sail a few degrees and feeling the whole vessel respond.
2. **Energy check-in:** Pause and ask, *Is the mind heavy* (‘*Tuning Out*’ – *dull/flat/low*) or *hot* (*restless/anxious/over-driven*)?
  - a. When the mind is heavy, use the Power Triad: If things feel dull or low, it can help to add a gentle lift – sit a little more upright (Enthusiasm/Energy), ask “*What is this, right now?*” (Penetrating Inquiry), or recall something wholesome and inspiring (Energising Joy).
  - b. When the mind is hot use the Ballast Triad: If things feel ‘Anxious and Agitated’ or over-driven, settling often helps more than solving – lengthen the out-breath (Deep Calm), stay with one simple object (A Unified Mind), or widen awareness to the whole field (Balanced Equanimity).

3. **Feeding what helps:** When calm, joy, or clarity arises, it can be worth lingering – letting attention *marinate* in well-being so the ‘Support’ that’s present is quietly strengthened.
4. **Starving what hinders:** When loops of craving or resentment appear, there may be no need to fight – simply withdraw the fuel by pausing the story and returning to breath or body.
5. **Checking the trim:** When the mind is neither heavy nor hot, but clear and bright, very little is required – let the raft sail and taste balance without strain.
6. **Trusting the process:** The Seven Supports are innate capacities that become reliable through repeated cultivation and the easing of the hazards – this training extends beyond meditation into conversation, decision-making, ethical choices, and everyday pressures.

### Self-Reflection questions

1. When under pressure, do I tend to drift more toward heaviness (sluggishness, boredom, low mood) or toward heat (restlessness, anxiety, busyness)?
2. Looking at the Seven Supports, which one feels most accessible or naturally present in my life right now?
3. When energy is low, do I habitually try to calm down (and sink further), rather than gently re-energising?
4. Can I recall a recent moment when I was outside my window of tolerance – either too activated or too shut down? Which Support might have helped me return?
5. How does the approach of feeding what helps and starving what harms change the way I relate to craving, aversion, or compulsion?
6. What would it look like for me to stop rehearsing the fight with my past and begin cultivating the conditions for my future?
7. Am I practising this path mainly as something I do (rules and techniques), or as someone I am becoming (the cultivation of character)?

### Journaling prompts

1. **The instrument panel:** Draw a simple dashboard with seven gauges – one for each Support. Mark where each needle sits today (empty → full). Write one sentence for each gauge: What conditions raised it? What conditions lowered it?
2. **Feeding and starving:** Describe a moment today when you noticed an unhelpful loop (craving, resentment, worry, self-attack) and *starved* it

by withdrawing attention. What did you do instead, and what changed in your body or mind?

3. **In the middle:** Recall a moment when you felt balanced – alert but not tense, relaxed but not dull. What conditions allowed that state to arise? What helped it last?
4. **Energising the raft:** Write about an activity that reliably activates the Power Triad for you – Interest/Inquiry, Energy, and Joy – without tipping into stimulation or craving. What makes it wholesome and sustainable?
5. **Calming the waters:** Write yourself a short ‘prescription’ for when you feel overwhelmed: “*When I’m agitated, the specific steps I will take to access Deep Calm are...*” (include body cues: breath, posture, grounding, simplifying your focus.)
6. **Appropriate Attention:** Recall a difficult interaction. Rewrite the moment as if you had applied Appropriate Attention: what might you have noticed, valued, or responded to differently – either in yourself, the other person, or the wider conditions?
7. **The long crossing:** Write a letter to your future self. Describe how the Seven Supports can help you navigate the long crossing of ordinary life – especially when the old Hazards return as sirens, storms, fog, or whirlpools. What do you want your future self to remember?

### **Supporting Material: scientific and philosophical perspectives**

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of The Seven Supports, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** The *Window of Tolerance* (optimal arousal): Neuroscience suggests the brain functions best within an intermediate range of arousal, often called the Window of Tolerance (and related to the Yerkes–Dodson arousal–performance curve). Within this zone, prefrontal cortex networks support attention, working memory, emotional regulation, and inhibitory control. When arousal is too high (hyper-arousal, sympathetic dominance), threat circuitry including the amygdala becomes more dominant, narrowing attention and increasing impulsive reactivity. When arousal is too low (hypo-arousal, parasympathetic shutdown/freeze), energy and engagement drop, attention dulls, and dissociation or depressive states become more likely. The practical aim is to notice early shifts and return toward the optimal zone; the Seven Supports can be understood as capacities that help up-regulate engagement when arousal is low and down-regulate agitation when arousal is high.

- ★ **Psychology:** Flow and resource-building: Psychological research describes flow as a state of absorbed engagement that arises when skills are well matched to challenges, producing sustained attention, reduced self-referential rumination, and a sense of intrinsic motivation. Positive psychology extends this by emphasising resource building rather than symptom reduction alone: cultivating strengths such as resilience, optimism, curiosity, and emotional balance. In this lens, the Seven Supports can be understood as practical capacities that strengthen psychological flexibility and support a shift from merely managing distress to more robust well-being.
- ★ **Philosophy:** Virtue ethics and character formation: Virtue ethics, found in both Buddhist traditions and Western philosophy (including Aristotle and Stoicism), emphasises the cultivation of stable dispositions of character over rigid rule-following. On this view, well-being emerges through the repeated formation of qualities such as balance, clarity, and care. The Seven Supports can be framed as cultivated qualities of the body/mind that support this transition from rule-based self-management toward embodied ethical responsiveness.

### **Remember to remember**

The Seven Supports are the telltales on the sail and the instruments on the console of our raft. They confirm, moment by moment, whether the body/mind is trimmed correctly for the crossing – whether we are drifting into dullness, being pulled by restlessness, or sailing steadily in balance. We began this journey looking for a way out of pain, difficulties and disappointments, and discovered something deeper: a way back into life. In the earlier stages of our journey, we learned to recognise hazards and abandon what was unhelpful; here, in the Freedom stage, the work becomes more subtle and more beautiful – we learn to live from the qualities that support a clear, steady mind.

As these supports strengthen, we no longer need the dangerous shore of old habits to comfort us, because we begin to carry our own refuge within. We can cool the system from the inside through ‘Deep Calm’, gather scattered attention into a ‘Unified Mind’, and meet experience with ‘Balanced Equanimity’ – not indifference, but steadiness – so pleasure and pain no longer throw us about like waves. When we lose our way, ‘Penetrating Inquiry’, ‘Enthusiasm’, and ‘Energising Joy’ restore momentum as a quiet, sustainable uplift rather than a rush of stimulation. This is the shift from *doing to being*: not forcing a permanent state, but repeatedly attuning, feeding what supports freedom, and returning again and again to a

non-reactive way of meeting life – less governed by craving, aversion, and confusion, and more guided by clarity, balance, and care.

Most importantly, these Seven Supports enable us to taste Freedom, even if briefly, and once verified we know the direction our Heart should take.

*“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.” ~ ‘Socrates’, a fictional teacher in Dan Millman’s Way of the Peaceful Warrior*

*“Just as the dawn is the forerunner and precursor of the rising of the sun, so too, good friendship is the forerunner and precursor of the arising of the seven factors of awakening.” ~ Gotama*

## Sutta References

### ★ **Bojjhaṅga Saṃyutta (SN 46) – Discourses on the Seven Supports**

- Summary: This collection is the canonical backbone for the Seven Supports: it defines the factors and shows how they are developed in lived practice. Within this saṃyutta, the Āhāra Sutta (SN 46.51) makes the method explicit: we learn what “feeds” and what “starves” both the hindrances and the awakening factors – so the mind can be steered by skilful attention rather than dragged by habit.

### ★ **Aggi Sutta (SN 46.53) – The Fire Discourse**

- Summary: The Buddha gives a practical rule for trimming the mind. When the mind is sluggish, it’s the wrong time to emphasise tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity – those qualities won’t rouse it; instead, cultivate investigation, energy, and joy. When the mind is agitated, do the reverse: tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity are the right medicine. And mindfulness is described as consistently useful in every condition.

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