

Seven Factors of Enlightenment

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

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Sīlasutta Sn46.3: ...Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu is accomplished in virtue, composure, understanding, freedom, or the knowledge and vision of freedom, even the sight of them is very helpful, I say. Even to hear them, approach them, pay homage to them, recollect them, or go forth following them is very helpful. Why is that? Because after hearing the teaching of such bhikkhus, a bhikkhu will live withdrawn in both body and mind, as they recollect and think about that teaching. At such a time, a bhikkhu is cultivating the (1) awakening factor of recollection; they develop it and perfect it...

Q: If you meet someone who has understood the Dhamma, and then you contemplate that teaching, do you then have the enlightenment factor of *Sati* - recollection?

Ajahn Nyanamoli: Only if you are thinking about the actual Dhamma. In other words, if you understood them correctly, then yes. Thinking about the information that you have gathered about the Dhamma is not an enlightenment factor; that's not the same as understanding the meaning, the core, of the Dhamma. If you understand the Dhamma, then when you think about it, the enlightenment factors will be brought to fulfillment. But, if you haven't understood the Dhamma for yourself, you can think about the Dhamma all you want—it won't be on the level of enlightenment factors, because it's not on the level of insight.

Before we get into the discussion, what are the enlightenment factors?

Q: Recollection (*sati*), the investigation into dhammas (*dhammavicaya*), effort (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*), calm (*passaddhi*), composure (*samādhī*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

Nm: That's kind of the problem with most of the things you read in the Suttas. It's been so long since they were taught. And, the only way to remember those things was through these linear lists, like one, two, three, four, five, six, or seven of this, or eight of that, and so on. That's just mere information.

Somebody who is enlightened might not even know about enlightenment factors in that order, in that list, in that particular way, the Buddha taught on some occasion. That's the important thing to realize if you want to contemplate the enlightenment factors or the noble eightfold path. It's the same thing. It's not one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, as the Suttas say. No, the right view comes first, and then recollection through that is right and the direction of your efforts is right, or your livelihood is right. It's not like you develop the right view, then go for the second step. It's not a step-by-step arrangement, and neither are the seven enlightenment factors.

One first needs to go and hear a Noble person's teaching— understand what they teach—and become a *sotāpanna*, and have the right view developed. Then, based on that correct view and standpoint, think about the Dhamma, and when it is recollected, those other enlightenment factors will develop. That won't happen by not having the right view and just thinking about the list of enlightenment factors.

Q: So I shouldn't think that if I do these seven things, step by step, it will lead to enlightenment.

Nm: Exactly, thinking, "If I do step by step, these seven things, it will culminate in complete enlightenment, but I have no clue what that enlightenment is—I have no right view regarding the escape from suffering and where the practice is. So, I'll just basically use the information that I have on the level of lists, collections, steps and methods, and instructions. And, I'll adhere to it with the hope it will kind of bring me the result." That won't work.

You first need to understand those factors, then they will come to fulfillment and development. Without understanding, without the right view, there are no seven enlightenment factors in you. It doesn't matter how much you think about it. If on the other hand, you don't think about them as this methodical list, step by step instructions, but try to understand their nature: What is correct recollection; What are the correct investigations of phenomena; What is the correct effort; What is *samādhi* as an enlightenment factor? and so on, then you can eventually start to develop them.

There are many things that you need to develop beforehand. All of that you can infer from reading the Sutta. So, have you developed all these things beforehand? Have you truly developed the right view that then makes you correctly recollected, that then makes you correctly think about the dhammas, that then brings joy and calm, and so on? Or, are you just fabricating joy or hoping for some calm as a kind of magical result through some magical method or technique, so that you don't have to drill the work and go through the painful process of trying to gain the understanding?

Q: These factors are factors of an awakened person, and only the awakened person is developing these factors.

Nm: Yes, these are factors for somebody who has the right view. Somebody who knows how to get to the result, how to fully achieve enlightenment, but hasn't done it yet. These factors are the factors that he should dwell on and contemplate and they will come to fulfillment if he just follows the direction of his own right view. The usefulness of why the Buddha listed these seven factors for those who have attained the right view but haven't completed the work. It's a good reminder to them, "Look, there are these seven aspects of the same thing that you already have, that you already understood, that already freed you partially. So dwell on these seven aspects and they will in return bring other aspects to fulfillment."

Q: I remember first coming across these factors, and trying to do them, sitting in meditation, watching the breath, and then trying to look for them and thinking, "I'm making an effort. I'm mindful. I'm investigating. I feel quite calm. I'm happy and I'm peaceful....thus I am doing quite well. Nibbana is just around the corner!"

Nm: Yes. That is quite normal, especially due to the whole *Abhidhamma*, where the whole Dhamma is presented as just a basic collection of lists and a myriad of information and parallels, and so on. But none of that is the Dhamma. Dhamma begins with the understanding of the principle. If you don't understand the principle of freedom from suffering, as in the Four Noble Truths- as just one principle with four aspects (If you fully understand it, you understood the four facets of one insight.). Without that, there is no Dhamma, even if you know all of the Suttas by heart and have collected a vast amount of information. That's something that people don't necessarily know because again, you're presented with so much stuff today, and so many different opinions. Then you come and read various things, and naturally, try to make sense of them. But, you're not aware that you're reading into it. You're not transparent enough. You don't have the right basis. You don't have the Gradual Training developed. So, when you come across this information, it's being misunderstood for *understanding*. And, most people's understanding is just that- a collection of information. They have one piece of information and they contrast it with another piece of information, and another piece of information, and develop greater information, a nice spider diagram. It's a form of understanding, but it's not a form of understanding that pertains to that individual personal level—internally to be known by the wise—as the Buddha says. Basically, the one that pertains to freedom from suffering for which no amount of information will suffice to free you—only that insight into the Four Noble Truths would.

That's the important thing to realize, if you don't have the right view, your sole goal then is to develop the right view—insight into freedom from suffering. To know for yourself suffering, the origin, the cessation, and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. When that's understood, then within that understanding you have the right recollection, you have the noble eightfold path, you have the seven enlightenment factors, you have the four right strivings, etc—whichever aspect, it's within that, and you will know that.

Now if you want to develop it more astutely, more precisely, and more efficiently, you then study further the information about the seven enlightenment factors, so that you can apply it correctly within that basis that you have. But, if you don't have a basis, it's just a collection of information.

Q: Quite dangerous in a way.

Nm: Very dangerous, because the information is just too easy to be misconceived, confused, mistaken for understanding. I don't want to make it sound like too much thinking or too much information is bad. It's dangerous, because of the wrong attitude underneath, which means whether you have the information or not, the wrong attitude is really what keeps you ignorant. So, don't think now, "I must not get all this information because it's dangerous." No, your ignorance is dangerous, so you have to always keep perspective in regard to that. "Ok, I am ignorant. And I'm collecting information now. I'm learning about the Suttas. I'm not taking anything for granted. I'm taking everything with a pinch of salt until I know for myself the way out of suffering."

Nothing shorter than *sotāpatti* should be a criterion of success. If you don't have that authentic attitude, then whether you have a little bit of information or a lot of information, it makes no

difference because you're already obscured by yourself, by being ignorant, by not having that right attitude that pertains to freedom from suffering as the only measure of understanding.

Q: So, I'm now reluctant to even talk about this. To provide further information about the enlightenment factors. I'll just continue:

...as they recollect and think about that teaching. At such a time, a bhikkhu is developing the (1) awakening factor of *recollection*; they develop it and perfect it. As they live recollected in this way they investigate, explore, and inquire into that teaching with wisdom. At such a time, a bhikkhu is developing the (2) awakening factor of *investigation into dhammas* they develop and perfect it.

Nm: All the enlightenment factors are peripheral and secondary. By developing one thing, another thing gets developed in the background. When he thinks and ponders about that teaching he understood, *dhammavicaya* gets developed. Not - he thinks about *dhammavicaya*, that's how *dhammavicaya* gets developed. He thinks about the Dhamma, ponders on Dhamma, or fortifies his understanding of Dhamma, that effort is the development of *dhammavicaya*, secondarily.

...As they *investigate dhammas* with wisdom in this way their effort is activated and tireless. At such a time, a bhikkhu is developing the (3) awakening factor of effort; they develop it and perfect it.

Nm: Such effort, again, is developed indirectly. He is making the effort to clarify what he understands, to fortify, to sustain, to protect that context—all that he invests into that brings the enlightenment factor of effort to fulfillment. He's striving towards the goal of freedom from suffering that he understood but hasn't fully fortified. The direction of the right view, the understanding that you get through the right view, and the effort you're putting into furthering that understanding, is the enlightenment factor of effort and striving.

...When they are striving, joy arises. At such a time, a bhikkhu is developing the (4) awakening factor of joy; they develop it and perfect it.

Nm: Joy arises on its own as a result, as a byproduct of his striving. Not like, "Oh, let me just be joyful now, because that's another factor that the Buddha talks about." No, follow the direction of the right view. Don't fall from it. Don't neglect it. Joy will then arise on account of the effort that you invested in following that direction.

...When the mind is full of joy, the body and mind become calm. At such a time, a bhikkhu is developing the (5) awakening factor of calmness; they develop it and perfect it. When the body is calm and one feels joy, the mind becomes composed. At such a time, a bhikkhu is developing the (6) awakening factor of composure; they develop it and perfect it. They closely watch that peaceful mind with equanimity. At such a time, a bhikkhu is developing the (7) awakening factor of equanimity; they develop it and perfect it.

Nm: Again, that's not something he does directly. It's done indirectly by fulfilling further the understanding of the four noble truths. That's how you will establish the right *samādhī*, by being fully committed, directed, and composed in that one right way. That's one-pointedness—not one-pointedness of the tip of your nose, or something. It's one-pointedness of the direction towards freedom from suffering—composed in that one direction. That's the only meaning of the *one-way-only* reference in the *satipaṭṭhānas*.

No right view equals no enlightenment factors, no *samādhī*, no freedom from suffering, no understanding, no wisdom, and no equanimity. If you think you have this *samādhī*, equanimity, and this joy, without the right view—knowing that you don't have a right view—take those experiences with a pinch of salt. Recognize that they might not be the correct *samādhī* and correct equanimity, because there is no right view. It's not to say, there is no *form* of *samādhī* at all. But, it's important to recognize that there can be wrong *samādhī*—mistaken to be the right *samādhī*—and that cannot magically become the right *samādhī*.

Sometimes people might think, “Well, you know, I know my *samādhī* is not right, but if I keep investing in the effort in it, it will become right.” No, right *samādhī* is the result of the right view and correctly directed mind. Right *samādhī* is not the result of going along with the wrong *samādhī*. That's already the wrong view. Thinking you can directly develop *samādhī* as a form of concentration that would then result in some liberation. You develop the right *samādhī* by following the right view, which is guided by the right recollection, and correct investigation of dhammas, joy, calm, and effort, and that becomes a unification of the mind. It's equally secondary, the right *samādhī*—it's indirect. It's a *peripheral* from where you are making your effort towards understanding freedom from suffering.

...Mn117: These three states run and circle the right view: right view, right effort, and right recollection.

Nm: It's always those three. If you have the right view, it means there is a degree of right effort, and it certainly means there is a degree of right recollection. If you have the right recollection, the right view is there, and the right effort is there. If you have the right effort, the right view is brought back, and the right recollection is there. That's what I mean by saying that “they're not linear”, and if you try to understand them on the level of their linear information, you will fail, because they cannot be attended to directly and be understood in their nature. You can attend to information directly. “Okay, there's one, two, three, four, five, six, seven.” But, what does that information pertain to?—it pertains to understanding freedom from suffering. What suffering?—well, suffering that I'm liable to here and now.

So instead of me making the effort to draw connections and make parallels that nobody else thought of, and somehow get a magical insight on account of it, let me dwell on the level of my liability to suffering—endure it, don't try to get rid of it or manage it—which is actually why a person would try

to jump and pounce on the information hoping it will bring them freedom. They are trying to get rid of that liability that is painful.

The efforts to understand the Dhamma—if they're directed towards manipulating and drawing parallels between information that you collected about the Dhamma—it's just going to become another form of management of your liability to suffering, not the uprooting of it.

Yes, you need the information. You need to be told what to do. If you refuse to allow yourself to come back onto the level that it matters, where that applies, you're just going to stay on the level of playing with information for the rest of your life, because you refuse to give up the attitude of trying to manage your liability to suffering by understanding information. That is psychotherapy; that is psychology; that's any kind of worldly way of dealing with suffering and pain—it's all on the level of management. It's only relatively efficient. If you learn the seven factors, you learn the four noble truths, you learn the Gradual Training, and you have more information than you need. As we said before, back in the Buddha's day, there were no Sutta collections as we have them now. All the information we have now on account of the *nikāyas*, monks did not have access to that. Only Venerable Ānanda remembered all of it. Most of the monks didn't. Probably the vast majority of them knew maybe one story, with one instruction, and that was enough for enlightenment. Why? Because they did the work. If you know the four noble truths and you know the Gradual Training—most importantly—you know what comes first: the virtue, sense restraint, guarding of the sense doors. You have all the information you need. Now you have to start doing that. Which is what the information is telling you to do. And, that's the catch; people don't do it. Even when they take on the virtue, take on the gradual training, they still keep it on the level of performing the instruction on the level of information, because they don't want to endure the *dukkha* on the right level—that liability to suffering. They don't want to feel it without immediately trying to manage it, because it's too unpleasant. You need to give up the management, and just stay under the pressure of that unresolved liability to suffering—on the deepest existential level so that the right view can take root and start to grow. It can only do so on that basis.

The Buddha taught only two things: suffering and freedom from it. If somebody correctly understands the nature of *dukkha*, there are only two outcomes of that, either mental derangement or noble search. If they don't lose their mind on account of the recognition of that liability to suffering, that existential dread, then they will have no other choice but to try and correctly uproot it, and seek the correct information—that will then be the basis for them making the right effort and enduring things on the right level. It comes down to that, enduring things on the right level. If you endure things on the level of that existential *dukkha*—without trying to manage it, get rid of it, distract yourself from it— then the whole basis for the right view and everything else that comes from it is being developed. That's the fundamental difference between information and understanding it. It's in two opposite directions. Information gives you something that needs to be understood, but only your effort to understand can bring that understanding—not more information. More information cannot accidentally result in understanding—only your effort to understand.

It doesn't matter how much information you have, and how dependent you became on that information. All of that can be cleaned away in one sweep of just re-establishing yourself, if you're

brave enough and strong enough to endure it on the level of, “I am still liable to sickness, aging death, anxiety, dread, suffering. I know no escape from it internally. I am not able to not move when these things present themselves, which is why I always try to avoid those things from presenting themselves. I always try to cover up when they’re present—with the possibility of their presence. I always try to ignore and distract myself from it.” If you abandon these attitudes and endure these things on the right level, even the little information you collected will start slotting itself in the right place, because now you got the right basis. That’s why the two factors for the right view are correct information (utterance of another), and the *yonisomanasikāra* - without which, there is no right view. Even if you listen to the Buddha himself giving you the information.
