

The seven factors of Awakening- Part three

By Bhante Anuttara

Sometimes, you may question, "For what purpose do I practice, and where does this practice lead me?" There could be many answers based on your personal circumstances and motivations.

In general, all our practice in terms of Buddhism will lead us to the fulfilment of the seven enlightenment factors.

The seven enlightenment factors are mindfulness, investigation of phenomena, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. They are called the seven enlightenment factors as they literally lead us to the state of enlightenment. Buddha said, "They lead to enlightenment, therefore they are called factors of enlightenment" (SN73).

The seven factors provide the preparation for enlightenment and are very representative elements of the enlightened state. That's why in the last article, I stated it's the alpha and Omega of enlightenment. Furthermore, they become the basic dwelling mode of an enlightened being, as Buddha said, "Whichever of these seven factors of enlightenment I want to dwell in any time, I dwell in that factor of enlightenment during any time. While it persists I understand 'it persists.' But if it abates in me, I understand 'it has abated in me for a particular reason'...." SN46:4 I guess many of us reading this article are more or less interested in enlightenment. So these seven factors of enlightenment are indisputable terms throughout our whole spiritual journeys. Additionally, I would like to share about the practical uses of these seven factors in our daily life as well.

In the last article, we discussed mindfulness—the first factor of enlightenment. In this article, I would like to discuss the second factor of enlightenment—'investigation of phenomena.' Its original Pali term is dhamma vicaya. Here, dhamma means phenomenon, and vicaya means investigation. Some translators prefer to translate as discrimination of states or discriminative knowledge of states. It simply means knowing what is what, for example, what is wholesome, what is not wholesome, what is beneficial, and what is not beneficial. This way of translation is popular in the Mahayana tradition (Late Buddhism practiced in China, Japan, Korea). However, both ways of translation have their benefits to understand dhamma vicaya in a wider spectrum and depth.

Actually, as I see in Buddha's original scripture, we can find both ways of exposition and implication. In one occasion, Buddha defined dhammavicaya as "searching investigation, scrutinising, for insight into one's own personal conditions..." (KS, V, p93). And, in another occasion, he talked about the way of nourishment on this factor, such that "we have to bring careful attention to wholesome and unwholesome, blameable and blameless states, inferior and superior states, dark and bright states as their counterparts...." (SN.V105).

With these two paragraphs, we can see that both above definitions (investigation and discrimination) are compatible with Buddha's original discourses on dhammavicaya. At this point, some of you who remember the two-fold meaning of dhamma (all phenomena vs. Buddha's teaching) may ask what will be the meaning of dhamma regarding dhammavicaya. As an answer, I would like to formulate this sentence: "Through the investigation of dhamma (phenomenon), we gain the investigation of Dhamma (Buddha's teaching, the Truth)." We can simply say, "we learn Dhamma through dhamma." To me, this term dhammavicaya is appealing and also, very similar to the term Vipassana. Vipassana's meaning can also be understood in two folds: as a method (look deeply through phenomenon) and as a result (gain the insight of Truth). In some traditions, dhammavicaya is identical with insight or wisdom.

Now let us talk about the practical applications of this factor to cultivate and develop for the process of enlightenment and for our daily lives.

The first thing we should remember is its preliminary condition. That is mindfulness—the sati. The difference between normal thinking processes and dhammavicaya is whether mindfulness is present or not throughout the process. So, simply say, the quality of investigation of phenomena or discrimination of states basically depends on the quality of mindfulness that you generate.

That's why this factor of dhammavicaya has been exposed in conjunction with meditation practices like mindfulness of breathing or the four foundations of mindfulness. However, mere mindfulness alone cannot serve the process of investigation and discrimination effectively and successfully.

In addition to mindfulness, there is another important quality we should cultivate, and that is the certain knowledge and understanding of Dhamma (Buddha's teaching). Buddha often emphasised frequent hearing of Dhamma and the necessity of discussions on Dhamma to gain the basic frame and orientation of practice.

In my view, we all are doing the investigation of phenomena more or less, knowingly or unknowingly. Because we are living in phenomena, or even we ourselves are the phenomenon. And, often naturally, we do a sort of investigation as considering, figuring out, analysing, or reasoning. But our usual investigation is shallow and superficial due to a lack of mindfulness and limited knowledge of Dhamma. That's why, in most cases, the result is quite fruitless and even frustrating. It's solely due to a lack of mindfulness and limited knowledge of Dhamma.

Now we know what we should prepare for the investigation of phenomena and the discrimination of states. That is sufficient mindfulness and Dhamma knowledge (e.g., the three characteristics of existence, the Four Noble Truths, interdependency of every phenomenon).

Let us recollect our strategy on the investigation of phenomena and discrimination of states by reflecting on Buddha's original words regarding the development of these factors of Dhammavicaya.

"There are wholesome and unwholesome states, blameable and blameless states, inferior and superior states, dark and bright states with their counterparts: frequently giving careful attention to them is the nutriment for the arising of the unarisen enlightenment factor of discrimination of states and for the fulfillment by the development of the arisen enlightenment factor of discrimination of states."

(SN.V.105)

We can apply dhammavicaya in our daily life spontaneously and sometimes specifically. We simply live our life with established mindfulness. Whenever we encounter any phenomenon with mindfulness, there will be ongoing revelation of three characteristics (impermanence, no self, and dukkha). Through this type of investigation, we lessen our own craving for phenomena, and that much we become free from bondage. Or you can apply it to specific phenomena like certain desires or anger or anxiety. With the right investigation, there will be generalisation and disidentification.

For example, when there is anxiety, bring careful attention to it. You will see that anxiety objectively and be able to generalize it instead of identifying with it as yours. When you watch this anxiety objectively, you may see the deep cause of it. When your mindfulness is clear and strong enough, there will be distance created, and with the distance, proceed the detachment from that phenomenon. And that much you become freer. Another effect of applying wise attention (yoniso manasikara) onto

phenomena as a basic strategy is the development of discriminative knowledge on given phenomena. As I mentioned at the beginning, simply say, you know what is what, what is wholesome and what is not, what is beneficial and what is not. In that way, you develop a positive sense of discrimination of states.

Through this understanding on Dhammavicaya, may you become nearer to the accomplishment.

With metta

Bhante Anuttara