

The Seven Factors of Awakening

The Seven Factors of Awakening (sapta-bodhyanga) are mindfulness, investigation of phenomena, diligence, joy, ease, concentration, and letting go. Bodhyanga is made up of two words: bodhi and anga. Bodhi ("awakening," "enlightenment") comes from the root budh-, which means "to wake up," to be aware of what is going on within and all around you. A Buddha is "One Who Is Awakened." Anga means limb. Sapta-bodhyanga can also be translated as the Seven Limbs, or Factors, of Enlightenment.

After sitting in meditation at the foot of a ficus religiosa, known by Buddhists as the bodhi tree, when the morning star arose, the Buddha realized enlightenment and said, "How amazing that all living beings have the basic nature of awakening, yet they don't know it. So they drift on the ocean of great suffering lifetime after lifetime." It means that the potentialities of the Seven Factors of Awakening are already in us, but we don't know it.

It is said that the Buddha was reluctant at first to share the insight he experienced under the bodhi tree. Only after continuing his meditation did he realize that many beings would benefit if he offered concrete ways to help them wake up. The Seven Factors of Awakening offer a description of both the characteristics of awakening as well as a path to awakening. Imagine a tree with seven large limbs, each representing one Factor of Awakening. Every year, each of these branches grows longer and sends out new shoots with new leaves. Enlightenment is growing all the time. It is not something that happens once and is then complete. It is reassuring that the Buddha regarded joy and ease among these seven elements.

The First and main Factor of Awakening — the first limb of the bodhi tree — is mindfulness (smriti). Smriti literally means "remembering," not forgetting where we are, what we are doing, and who we are with. Mindfulness always arises in the context of a relationship with ourselves, other people, or things. It is not something we keep in our pocket and take out when we need it. When we see a friend on the street and recognize her, we have not taken "recognition" out of our pocket. It arose in the context of the situation. Our breathing, walking, movements, feelings, and the phenomena around us are all parts of the "relationship" in which mindfulness arises. With training, every time we breathe in and out, mindfulness will be there, so that our breathing becomes a cause and condition for the arising of mindfulness.

You might think, "I am the cause for mindfulness being present." But if you look around, you will never find an "I." The telephone's ring, the clock's chime, your teacher, and your Sangha can be favorable causes for mindfulness being present. Imagine yourself doing walking meditation on a beach, when suddenly the thought arises, "Do I have enough money in the bank?" If you return your awareness to your feet making contact with the sand, that is enough to bring you back to the present moment. You can do this because you have practiced walking meditation before. But it is your feet and not "I" that remind you to be present.

In the Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Buddha asks, "If you practice the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, how long will it take to become enlightened?" First he answers, "Seven years," but then he says, "It can be as short as half a month." It means that awakening is always available. It only needs favorable conditions. The sun is there, even when it is behind the clouds. The Buddha said, "By practicing the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, you will realize the Seven Factors of Awakening."¹

¹ Satipatthana Sutta. See Thich Nhat Hanh, Transformation and Healing.

Investigation of phenomena (dharma-pravichaya) is the Second Factor of Awakening. We humans love to investigate things. Often we want the results of our investigations to fit a certain mold or prove a certain theory, but at times, we are open and allow things simply to reveal themselves. In the latter case, our knowledge and our boundaries expand. When we want to investigate the bud on the branch of the tree, we might ask, "Where have you come from? Where are you going? Are you really that small?" The bud might reply, "I will grow into a leaf — green in the summer, orange in the fall. Then I will fall to the earth, and in two years I'll become a part of the earth. I am really not small. I'm as large as the earth." With mindfulness, investigation takes us deeply into life and into reality.

The Third Factor of Awakening is virya, which means energy, effort, diligence, or perseverance. Energy comes from many sources. Sometimes just thinking about what we might gain in the future gives us energy. In Buddhism, the sources of our energy are mindfulness, investigation, and faith in the practice. When we look deeply, we see that life is a miracle beyond our comprehension. But for many young people today, life is meaningless. Many thousands of young people commit suicide every year. In some countries, more young people die from suicide than from traffic accidents. We need to help young people cultivate the life-energy that comes from experiencing the wonders of life. We need to help their lives have meaning.

Even if we are in pain, if we can see meaning in our life, we will have energy and joy. Energy is not the result of good health alone or the wish to achieve some goal — material or spiritual. It is a result of feeling some meaning to our life. Making an effort at the wrong time or place dissipates our energy.

Sitting in meditation for lengthy periods before we have developed good concentration might cause us to dislike meditation, and even to stop sitting altogether. When Siddhartha practiced meditation under the bodhi tree, his concentration was already highly developed. When Kashyapa told Ananda that Ananda would not be invited to attend the first Council of the Buddha's disciples because he did not have a high enough degree of awakening, Ananda sat in meditation all night, and by dawn he realized "the fruit of arhatship."² When Ananda arrived at the council, Kashyapa and the others recognized that he had had a breakthrough. His shining presence was proof enough.² **"The fruit of arhatship": the transformation of all afflictions.**

The Fourth Factor of Awakening is ease (prashrabdhih). Diligence is always accompanied by ease. In the so-called Third World, one often feels more ease than in the "overdeveloped" countries of the First World. Here, everyone is under enormous pressure, and people need stress-reduction programs. Their stress comes from constant thinking and worrying and from their lifestyles. We have to learn ways to bring our energy from our head down to our abdomen. At least once every fifteen minutes, we need to practice letting go.

When we are sick, we stay in bed and do nothing. Often we don't even eat or drink. All of our energy is directed toward healing. We need to practice resting even when we are not sick. Sitting meditation, walking meditation, and mindful eating are good opportunities for resting. When you feel agitated, if you are able to go to a park or a garden, it is an opportunity for rest. If you walk slowly and remember to take it easy, if you are able to sit and do nothing from time to time, you can rest deeply and enter a state of true ease.

The Fifth Factor of Awakening is joy (priti). Joy goes with happiness (sukha), but there are differences. When you are thirsty and a glass of water is being served to you, that is joy. When you are actually able to drink the water, that is happiness. It is possible to develop joy in your mind, even when your body is not well. This will, in turn, help your body. Joy comes from touching things that are refreshing and beautiful, within and outside of ourselves. Usually we touch only what's wrong. If we can expand our vision and also see what is right, this wider picture always brings joy.

² "The fruit of arhatship": the transformation of all afflictions.

The Sixth Factor of Awakening is concentration (samadhi). Sam- means together, a- is bringing to a certain place, and -dhi is the energy of the mind. We collect the energy of our mind and direct it toward an object. With concentration, our mind is one-pointed and still, and quite naturally it stays focused on one object. To have mindfulness, we need concentration. Once mindfulness is developed, concentration, in turn, becomes stronger.

Concentration is not wholesome in itself. A thief needs concentration to break into a house. The object of our concentration is what makes it beneficial or not. If you use meditative concentration to run away from reality, that is not beneficial. Even before the time of the Buddha, many meditators practiced concentration to remove themselves from the world. Practicing this kind of concentration, the Buddha was not able to liberate himself from suffering. So he learned to use his concentration to shine light upon his suffering, and he was able to go deeply into life and develop understanding, compassion, and liberation.

The Seventh Factor of Awakening is equanimity, or letting go (upeksha). Equanimity is an aspect of true love.³ It is far from indifference. Practicing equanimity, we love everyone equally. In the Kakacupama Sutta (Example of the Saw), the Buddha says, "Even if robbers cut your limbs off with a saw, if anger arises in you, you are not a follower of my teachings. To be a disciple of the Buddha, your heart must bear no hatred, you must utter no unkind words, you must remain compassionate, with no hostility or ill-will."⁴

As a young monk, I memorized these words and even put them to music. This teaching touches our most noble intention, but it is the opposite of our strong habit energies. To transform these habit energies and realize our noblest intention, the Buddha and the Venerable Shariputra taught us: (1) to practice equanimity in the face of harsh words; (2) to learn not to feel annoyance, bitterness, or dejection; and (3) not to feel elated when praised, because we know that any praise is not for us as an individual, but for many beings, including our parents, teachers, friends, and all forms of life.

In the Greater Discourse on the Example of the Elephant's Footprint,⁵ Shariputra shows the way to meditate on the Four Great Elements in order to practice equanimity. When we meditate on the elements of earth, water, fire, and air inside and outside our bodies, we see that we and they are the same. When we transcend our idea of a separate self, our love will contain equanimity, knowing that we and others are truly the same. These Seven Factors are limbs of the same tree. If mindfulness is developed and maintained, the investigation of phenomena will meet with success. Joy and ease are wonderful feelings nourished by diligence. Concentration gives rise to understanding. When understanding is there, we go beyond comparing, discriminating, and reacting, and realize letting go. Those who arrive at letting go have the bud of a half-smile, which proves compassion as well as understanding. The Seven Factors of Awakening, if practiced diligently, lead to true understanding and emancipation. The Buddha said that the Four Immeasurable Minds of love practiced with the Seven Factors of Awakening bring Complete, Perfect Enlightenment. The Seven Factors of Awakening are, therefore, the practice of love.

³ See chap. 22 on the Four Immeasurable Minds.

⁴ Majjhima Nikaya 21.

⁵ Majjhima Nikaya 28.