

SEVEN FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE PROSPERITY OF SANGHA AND SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The sound of the zither and drum can still resonate in the audience's hearts because of the talented artist. Similarly, Buddhism has endured throughout history due to the propagation of the Sangha. From the very first days after his enlightenment, the Buddha established the *Sangha*, starting with the conversion of the five Venerable *Kondañña* brothers. This group of ascetic friends became the first members of the Buddhist *Sangha*. From there, the *Sangha* gradually developed into a large congregation. A few years later, the Buddha accepted the ordination of women and appointed *Bhikkhuṇī Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī* to oversee the *Bhikkhuṇī Sangha*. One of the Buddha's most significant contributions was the establishment of the *Sangha*. The emergence of the Buddhist *Sangha* had a profound impact on society, transforming contemporary Indian philosophical thought and offering a new perspective on people and life. By including individuals from all social classes in the Buddhist *Sangha*, the Buddha initiated a social revolution, challenging the existing notions of class and gender discrimination that had long dominated society and contributed to human suffering without a clear path to resolution.

KEYWORDS: Mindfulness, wisdom, faith, diligence.

INTRODUCTION

The Buddha identified several critical factors for building a prosperous *Sangha* throughout his forty-five years of preaching. These principles are recorded in the *Vinaya* and the *Pāli*

Canon, emphasizing the importance of Precepts, Concentration, and Wisdom. In particular, the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* outlines seven crucial factors: faith, shame, fear of wrongdoing, learning, diligence, mindfulness, and wisdom. Among these, wisdom is considered the fundamental factor in strengthening the *Saṅgha*. Just as the vast ocean is ready to receive all the rivers flowing into it, the Buddhist *Saṅgha* is open to welcoming everyone. The Buddha was born to teach the *Dhamma* for the happiness and peace of the majority, and he established the *Saṅgha* to promote joy and tranquility for all. Those who wish to join the *Saṅgha* to pursue a life of celibacy are accepted and can live in peace without discrimination based on status, class, gender, or any other factor. *Saṅgha* is a term commonly used to refer to the community of renunciants, which includes *Bhikkhus* (Monks), *Bhikkhunīs* (Nuns), *Sikkhamānās* (female novices), *Sāmañeras* (male novices), and *Sāmañerīs* (female novices). Among these groups, the *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunīs* have received full ordination and are fully committed to practicing the precepts of a renunciant; they are appropriately referred to as the *Saṅgha*. The other three groups are still in the preparation stage, working on the essential practices needed to become actual members of the *Saṅgha*. According to the *Mahāvagga* section of the *Pāli* Canon, after attaining enlightenment and spending seven weeks enjoying the *Dhamma* in *Bodhgaya*, the Buddha decided to go to *Isipatana* (now Sarnath) in the town of Benares to preach the Four Noble Truths to five ascetic friends, known as the five Venerable *Konidānā* brothers. Upon understanding the *Dhamma*, this group of ascetic monks became the first ordained disciples of the Buddha, marking the formation of the *Saṅgha*. The *Saṅgha* is an inclusive community founded on purity, harmony, equality, democracy, and non-discrimination based on color, ethnicity, or any other characteristic. This progressive community emerged early in human history and is of great significance. The term “*Saṅgha*” is not exclusive to the Buddhist *Saṅgha* but refers to all religious organizations within the *Srāmana* movement. During the time of the Buddha, many religious groups were referred to as *Saṅgha*. However, the Buddhist *Saṅgha* is distinguished by two key characteristics: harmony and purity. Regardless of the era, the *Saṅgha* continues to cultivate these qualities, maintaining its spiritual leadership role within the lay community. When the *Saṅgha* maintains its proper position, the *Dhamma* remains present and accessible throughout the world. This meaning is most vividly expressed through collective practice and study. Thus, the Buddha established the *Saṅgha* with the highest and most essential purpose for those seeking liberation from suffering.

Seven Factors That Contribute to the Prosperity of *Saṅgha* and Society

The seven factors that contribute to the flourishing of the *Saṅgha*, known as the seven non-retrogression *Dhammas*, are outlined in the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*: faith, moral shame, fear of wrongdoing, listening attentively, diligence, mindfulness, and wisdom. These factors are fundamental to the success of the *Saṅgha* that the Buddha established. The *Sutta* is a valuable historical document that chronicles the Buddha's final journey from *Rajagriha* to *Kushinagar*, where he chose to attain *Nibbāna*. During his last days, the Buddha kindly reminded his disciples of essential doctrinal points that form the core of the *Dhamma*. He offered meaningful and concise advice on various significant issues at each stop. These were the most dedicated words of the Master to his disciples. In *Rajagriha*, the Buddha highlighted essential principles to promote the growth and stability of the *Saṅgha* and ensure the continued survival of his teachings. The seven factors mentioned earlier capture the essence of his teachings and serve as guiding principles for the virtuous lives of all members of the *Saṅgha* throughout the ages.

1. Faith (*Saddhā*): Faith is the gateway to the spiritual path. For Buddhists seeking to understand the truth with wisdom, genuine faith is essential. *Saddhā* (faith or confidence) is the foremost mental factor among the positive qualities, serving as the foundation for all subsequent good actions. It is a vital virtue for those new to the Buddhist path. Therefore, those who possess true faith will attain all beneficial teachings. They remain grounded and do not stray beyond the guidance offered by the Buddha. *Saddhā* (Faith) derives from the root words “*sad*,” meaning good or skillful, and “*dha*,” meaning to place down. This term signifies placing complete trust in the Triple Gem (Buddha, *Dhamma*, *Saṅgha*), having faith in *kamma*, and believing in one's ability to attain enlightenment. *Saddhā* can eliminate doubts, much like a jewel of the wheel-turning king removes dirt from water. Its function guides us, similar to a safe path across a flood. *Saddhā* is characterized by non-delusion and determination. It can be likened to a hand that holds onto wholesome qualities, such as property and seeds.¹ Therefore, faith is essential as the starting point for practicing the *Dhamma*. It represents the first step toward liberation; if we falter or fail to take this initial step, we cannot progress to the subsequent steps.

The Buddha taught us to seek the truth and not accept it unquestioningly, regardless of the speaker's authority. He advised: “Do not believe simply because of legends, tradition,

¹ Nāṇamoli & Bodhi (tr), *Samyutta Nikāya*, p.184.

hearsay, scriptures, or reasoning. Do not accept beliefs after only a brief reflection; do not trust based on prejudice; and do not believe just because the monk is your teacher.” The Buddha dismissed such unquestioning beliefs, urging us to consider whom we should genuinely believe. Instead, he gently encouraged us to trust our own judgment and confidence. The Buddha taught that when we recognize specific dharmas as unwholesome, flawed, and criticized by the wise if practiced and accepted, they will lead to unhappiness and suffering; therefore, we must abandon them. Conversely, if we understand that specific *Dhammas* are wholesome, without fault, and praised by the wise, and that by practicing and accepting them, we will attain peace and happiness, we should embrace and abide by them. The Buddha consistently positions himself as a human being, teaching sentient beings, and he places his faith in humanity’s ability to discern between good and evil and right and wrong. Humans can liberate and awaken themselves, just as the Buddha was awakened and liberated. Regardless of the perspective, the Buddha always emphasizes faith as a fundamental principle. In the *Caṅkī Sutta*, the Buddha outlines three levels of approaching the truth: upholding the truth, awakening to the truth, and attaining the truth.²

2 & 3. *Hiri* (Moral shame) and *Ottappa* (Fear of wrongdoing): *Hiri* and *Ottappa* are essential mental factors that often coexist.³ In the *Ānguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha refers to *Hiri* and *Ottappa* as the “protectors of the world” because they are the foundation of morality and ethics. Therefore, practitioners should engage in self-reflection and cultivate these two virtues to strengthen their commitment to celibacy, a way of living characterized by disciplined and faultless conduct. *Hiri* is the sense of shame that helps prevent us from wrongdoing because we want to protect ourselves. We develop an understanding of shame as a means of preserving our self-respect. *Ottappa*, the fear of wrongdoing, acts as our conscience, warning us about the severe consequences of moral transgressions. These consequences can include blame and punishment from others, the painful karmic effects of evil actions, and the hindrance of our liberation from suffering. *Hiri* signifies the obligation to avoid wrongdoing through humility, while *Ottappa* represents the obligation to prevent evil due to fear. These concepts form the foundation of the Buddhist precepts. Practitioners embrace these precepts out of a genuine concern for sin and its consequences, which motivates them to restrain their body, speech, and mind from excessive indulgence. By adhering to these precepts, they aim to purify their body and mind, uphold the *Dhamma*, and promote the flourishing of

² Nāṇamoli & Bodhi (tr), Majjhima Nikāya, (No.95), Caṅkīsutta, p.775.

³ Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli (tr), The Path of Purification, Visuddhimagga, p.142.

Buddhism. If a monk possesses faith, often feels a sense of shame, fears wrongdoing, and diligently studies the precepts, then the *Dhamma* will be upheld. Thus, *Hiri* (moral shame) and *Ottappa* (moral wrongdoing) are two critical factors that govern the world. Without these two principles, no civilized society can exist. The teachings of the Buddha remain valuable and practical today.

4. Extensive knowledge and listening to a lot: Listening to a lot means listening to the Buddha's teachings. Listening to lectures, reading books, and discussing with good friends and knowledgeable people to thoroughly understand the Buddha's teachings are all called "wisdom practice." In the three types of learning (literary wisdom, contemplative wisdom, and practical wisdom), literary wisdom is the first stage of practice that leads to wisdom. Initially, we often seek out wise individuals to listen to their profound teachings of the *Dhamma*. However, reflecting thoughtfully and observing how to incorporate meditation into our studied topics is essential after hearing this. The correct approach to learning the *Dhamma* is to actively listen and then apply these teachings in our daily lives to experience their benefits. This is how one enters the *Dhamma* house through the door of attentive listening.

"A fool, though he spends his whole life being close to a wise man, still does not know the truth; like a spoon scooping soup; a wise man, though he spends a moment being close to a wise man, still immediately sees the truth; like the tongue tasting soup."⁴

Therefore, listeners of the *Dhamma* should avoid three mistakes: The first mistake is having a closed mind, which prevents a joyful and enthusiastic acceptance of the teachings. This resembles a sealed jar that cannot be filled with milk. The second mistake is allowing the mind to drift away, failing to pay attention, and listening with one ear while ignoring it with the other. This is like a jar with a hole in it, where any milk poured in will spill out. The third mistake is approaching the *Dhamma* with an impure mindset, driven by desires for honor, fame, selfishness, or greed. This is comparable to a dirty jar. We should not allow these negative states of mind to dominate us. Instead, we should receive the *Dhamma* with a joyful, open, and transparent mindset, like a clean, empty jar without any holes. This way, the profound teachings can indeed permeate our bodies and minds. The Buddha taught: "The holy disciple who hears much is not bound by birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain,

⁴ Bikkhu Bodhi (tr), *Dhammapāda*, verse 64-65, p.33.

anxiety, and despair. I say that person is not bound by suffering.” In other words, liberation is the path that transcends the darkness of ignorance, the path of ending craving through proximity to the wise, who listen to the wonderful *Dhamma*, leading to the dissolution of the five hindrances. Being close to a genuine person allows one to hear the profound teachings of the *Dhamma*. By listening to these teachings, one develops faith. With faith, one is encouraged to act with reason. When guided by the right thoughts, one becomes mindful and alert. This mindfulness and alertness help control the senses. When the senses are controlled, one acts wisely with body, speech, and mind. One can eliminate the five hindrances by performing good actions with the body, speech, and mind. The five hindrances are the food that nourishes ignorance; when the five hindrances are eliminated, ignorance has no cause to exist. Thus, the path to ending ignorance so that wisdom can be present begins with listening to the wonderful *Dhamma*. Diligence in listening, contemplation, and practice must be applied skillfully and simultaneously to make the training more effective.

5. Diligence (*Viriya*): Diligence is a consistent and indispensable element in a practitioner. It is the root of all perfect achievements. It can be said that the process from ordinary to holy is like a jade necklace, and diligence is like the thread running through the necklace. A practitioner who wants to practice virtue must make constant efforts throughout their study path. *Viriya* represents diligence in consistently completing one’s work. *Viriya* is often described as the state or action of someone persistent or patient.⁵ It signifies actions that are carried out correctly and effectively. *Viriya* embodies supportive and sustaining qualities, much like an old, dilapidated house being reinforced by new pillars. In this way, *Viriya* bolsters and sustains other positive mental factors that arise alongside it. It is regarded as one of the five controlling faculties (*Indriya*)⁶ because it helps overcome laziness. *Viriya* is also counted among the five controlling powers, as it remains steadfast and unshaken by laziness. Moreover, it is one of the four means to achieve the ultimate goal (*Iddhipāda*) and is classified as one of the seven factors of enlightenment (*Bojjhaṅga*). Lastly, *Viriya* culminates in Right Effort, one of the eight factors of the Noble Path (*Atṭhaṅgika-magga*). Terms such as diligence, effort, and exertion are often used as synonyms for *Viriya*. The goal of prevention is to stop unwholesome and unprofitable motives and actions from arising. This involves protecting our senses: when our eyes see forms, our ears hear sounds, our noses smell odors, our tongues taste flavors, our bodies touch objects, and our minds perceive internal images or

⁵ Nāṇamoli & Bodhi (tr), Majjhima Nikāya, Kītāgiri Sutta. (No.70), p.577.

⁶ Nāṇamoli & Bodhi (tr), Samyutta Nikāya, Sālā Sutta, p.494.

concepts, we should strive not to become attached to the general and specific characteristics of these experiences. By avoiding attachment, we can master our senses and prevent unwholesome motives and actions from developing. The effort to abandon involves the determination to eliminate or abolish specific thoughts, particularly those concerning sense pleasures, as well as thoughts filled with anger, hatred, violence, and killing. The Buddha taught: “Prevention, cessation, cultivation, and protection are the four efforts declared by the Master, who is like the sun. A *Bhikkhu* who practices effort and diligence will ultimately attain the goal of ending suffering.” Right effort is included in the concentration group of the Noble Eightfold Path, divided into Morality, Concentration, and Wisdom. It operates simultaneously with mindfulness and the right concentration. Without the right effort, overcoming the hindrances that hinder spiritual progress is difficult. Right effort eliminates evil and unwholesome thoughts that act as a barrier to concentration while promoting and maintaining wholesome mental factors that aid the development of concentration. When meditating, many obstacles surround us, such as laziness and dullness. This is the time to apply the right effort. We do not make an effort when needed. Although young and healthy, we are lazy, letting our minds be passive; where can we see the path?⁷

6. Mindfulness (*Sammāsati*): Mindfulness is a path to understanding reality. Buddhist enlightenment involves seeing reality as it truly is. Many people can feel and experience this reality, but often struggle to express it in words. Meditation enables individuals to transcend the illusions of the past, escape the distractions of daydreaming about the future, and reconnect with their present selves. Mindfulness counters false perceptions, incorrect speech, misguided actions, and unsuitable livelihoods. It is cultivated by focusing on correct views, right thoughts, appropriate speech, and right actions, and this practice is known as right mindfulness. The term “*Sati*,” which means mindfulness, refers to the ability to remember,⁸ but in this context, it signifies awakening and a clear perception of one’s thoughts and actions. In the Noble Eightfold Path, the term “*Sati*” is paired with the word “*Sammā*,” which means “right.” Together, they form “*Sammā-sati*,” which translates to right mindfulness,⁹ attention, or knowing. Mindfulness is part of the concentration group within the Noble Eightfold Path, including Right Effort and Right Concentration. These three factors are interconnected and mutually influence one another. However, mindfulness is considered the most crucial element because it is essential for achieving tranquility and wisdom.

⁷ Bikkhu Bodhi (tr), *Dhammapāda*, verse 280, p.65.

⁸ Davids (tr), (1881), *Buddhist Suttas*, Clarendon Press, p.145.

⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

Mindfulness functions as a mental factor; therefore, it is a vital aspect of the mind. Without mindfulness, a practitioner cannot fully perceive sensory objects or be completely aware of their actions. It serves as a guide for individuals on their journey toward purity and liberation. Therefore, mindfulness is considered the only path leading to the purity of sentient beings, overcoming fear and anxiety, ending suffering, and attaining true happiness.¹⁰ To put it more simply and directly, practicing mindfulness, or the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, is to protect oneself and others, ultimately bringing happiness to everyone. Here, patience, harmlessness, loving-kindness, and compassion are virtues through which we get protection and security from others. These virtues cannot be practiced without mindfulness.¹¹ This means that a person who lives in mindfulness has a generous mind, always controlling his body, speech, and mind so as not to harm sentient beings.

7. Wisdom (*Paññā*): *Paññā* refers to the right understanding and knowledge of the true nature of things.¹² It involves seeing life through the lens of *Anicca* (Impermanence), *Dukkha* (Suffering), and *Anatta* (Non-Self). Wisdom is crucial for cognitive understanding and as a moral and spiritual life principle. It is a foundational element and the driving force behind wholesome motivations, much like the rising sun heralds the dawn. Wisdom guides practitioners to lead righteous lives through their thoughts, speech, actions, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation. In essence, wisdom encompasses the presence of the remaining seven truths. The life of wisdom is characterized by profound peace, free from suffering, and reflects the qualities of a saint, earning the world's respect. A wise person's actions, intentions, wishes, desires, and resolutions are all directed toward creating peace and happiness for themselves and others, both in this life and the next. In terms of cognition, wisdom understands the four noble truths. These are the knowledge of suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to liberation from suffering. At the same time, wisdom understands the nature, origin, cessation, and path to the cessation of clinging to the five aggregates and the twelve links of dependent origination. The Buddha taught that our lack of understanding of the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination traps us in the cycle of birth and death. In this context, understanding refers to wisdom, the ability to see things as they are. This wise perspective emphasizes detachment and non-attachment. As a result, wisdom paves the way to freedom from suffering and progress toward a fulfilling life. When it comes to the origins of suffering and happiness, a wise person views all things

¹⁰ Sharf R, (2014), Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan, *Philosophy East and West*, p.943.

¹¹ Marlatt GA, Kristeller J (1999), *Mindfulness and meditation*, p.68.

¹² Keown, Damien (2003), *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, p.218.

through the lens of dependent origination. Therefore, happiness and suffering are part of the endless cycle of dependent origination.¹³ In this context, a wise person will strive to live positively, understanding that their good and bad actions always influence those around them. This awareness means that building and protecting a happy life for oneself also contributes to building and protecting happiness for others and vice versa. Additionally, such a person aims to lead a life of altruism, kindness, and justice, ensuring that their actions do not harm themselves or others in this life or the next.

CONCLUSION

The seven elements outlined here contribute significantly to the standard of a virtuous life. These elements are independent of culture, tradition, country, or nationality; they are not rigid rules or administrative structures from any organization. Instead, they are practical and effective practices that can be flexibly applied to suit each individual. The seven elements outlined above are essential for the *Saṅgha* life, regardless of time or place. Furthermore, the teachings of the Buddha emphasize the importance of individual effort rather than relying solely on collective experience. Each individual's moral integrity contributes to the community's beauty and dignity. Thus, every *Bhikkhu* or *Bhikkhunī* who embodies steadfast faith, a sense of shame, a fear of wrongdoing, erudition, diligence, mindfulness, and wisdom will significantly enhance the community's vitality. This individual commitment serves as an endless source of energy for the growth of the *Saṅgha*. In other words, harmony and purity are crucial strengths that enable the community of monks and the Buddhist *Saṅgha* to navigate the changes of the times while maintaining their rightful position and role within the *Dhamma* and society. Indeed, the Buddhist *Saṅgha* did not impose any rules on the social origin of its members who entered the holy life. Therefore, it is often said that the Buddha's opening of the doors of the *Saṅgha* was the most significant social revolution in thought. This revolution began with the improvement of human beings, not with the reform of social institutions. This also means there can be no social revolution without man's revolution.

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