
The Significance of Seven Purifications (Sattavisuddhî) in Modern Society

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Abstract

The main objective of this article is to explore the significance of the Seven Purifications, as analyzed by Ven. Buddhaghosa Thera in his renowned work, *Visuddhimagga*. The Pali text has been translated into English as the Path of Purification by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. This pinnacle text offers an exceptional explanation of the Seven Purifications, distilled through the framework of the Threefold Training (*Sīla*, *Samādhi*, and *Paññā*). The *Visuddhimagga* provides a comprehensive guide to the noble path leading to *Nibbāna*. The author's purpose in motivating Buddhists to practice the Noble Eightfold Path, with the time-tested and proven details underpinning the Buddha's teaching, is distinct; the text presents a clear and lucid understanding of the Buddha's teaching. In this article, the writer first presents a general inquiry into the Seven Purifications; next, he focuses on a more meticulous discussion of their attendant features. Concurrently, he will highlight the practical applications of the Seven Purifications for contemporary society.

Keywords: Seven Purification; Virtues, Concentration; Wisdom, Human Society; *Dṭṭhi* (View); *Nibbāna*

An Overview of the Seven Purifications

Theravāda Buddhist practice aims to realize the Four Noble Truths and attain enlightenment (*Nibbāna*). This is achieved by developing the Noble Eightfold Path consisting of the three trainings of virtues (*Sīla*), concentration (*Samādhi*), and wisdom (*Paññā*). Having developed the right Virtues and the Right Concentration, a meditator must progress to practice insight (*Vipassanā*)

meditation to reach the final destination of *Nibbāna*. As described in the discourse on the Relay of Chariots (Ñāṇmoli Bhikkhu & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005) (*Rathavinīta Sutta*, Trenckner V, 1979), the meditator has to experience the seven stages of purification in an ascending order, gradually beginning with the purification of virtues and culminating in the purification by knowledge and vision. Over this spiritual voyage, a disciple develops the sixteen types of insight (*Vipassanā-ñāṇa*) knowledge culminating in the path and fruition knowledge of Stream-entry (*Sotāpanna*), Once-returner (*Sakadāgāmi*), Non-returner (*Anāgāmi*) and finally the Arhathood and the state of *Nibbāna*. (Ven. Sri Nanarama, Matara 1993)

Bhikkhu Anālayo, in his article "The Seven Stages of Purification in Comparative Perspective," published in the *Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies*, argues that the Seven Purifications may not be of Buddhist origin. Additionally, he offers several other interesting observations on this topic throughout the article. (Anālayo, 2014)

In the same article, *Bhikkhu Anālayo* makes several insightful remarks on the Seven Purifications through comparative analysis. For instance, he studies different versions of the *Rathavinīta Sutta*, including the two Chinese translations of 《車輓經》 (*Chē'è Jīng*), as well as extant fragmentary Sanskrit translations of the *Rathavinīta Sūtra* discovered in Central Asia. Additionally, he contrasts the concept of the 'Seven Purifications' presented in the *Rathavinīta Sutta* and later in the *Visuddhimagga* with the nine purifications found in the *Dasuttara Sutta*.

Bhikkhu Anālayo's subsequent observations are thought-provoking and noteworthy. His article provides a broader perspective on the Seven Purifications and the concept of *Visuddhi*, or purification. Contrary to the prevailing belief that progressing through the seven stages of *Visuddhi* leads to liberation, *Bhikkhu Anālayo* argues otherwise. Citing the *Rathavinīta Sutta*, he demonstrates that *Ñāṇadassana* does not necessarily represent *Nibbāna*. *Anālayo* further contends that even in the seventh stage of *Visuddhi*, purification cannot be regarded as the ultimate goal or liberation. Therefore, he holds that the concept of *Visuddhi* likely existed in various religious traditions before its Buddhist adoption, recontextualized with a semantic shift. Similarly, we find instances of Brahmins engaging in early morning river-bathing rituals for defilement cleansing and purification. The historical Buddha criticized such popular, long-standing rituals in his time. A good example can be found in the *Vatthūpama Sutta* (Trenckner, V 1979) in the *Majjhimanikāya*. The *sutta* records a conversation between a Brahmin named *Sundarika Bhāradvāja* and the Buddha as follows:

Brahmin: “Does Master Gotama go to the *Bāhuka* River to bathe?”

The Buddha: “Why, the *Bāhuka* River? What can the *Bāhuka* River do?”

Brahmin: “Master *Gotama*, the *Bāhuka* River is held by many to give liberation, it is

held by many to give merit, and many wash away their evil actions in the *Bāhuka*

River...”(Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2009)

In response to the then-established sacred river bathing rituals for the atonement of evils, the Buddha uttered the following verse:

Bāhuka and Adhikakkā

Gayā and Sundarikā, too

Payāga and Sarassati,

And the stream Bahumatī

A fool may there forever bathe

Yet will not purify dark deeds.’

One pure in heart has evermore

The Feast of spring, the Holy Day;

One fair in act, and pure in heart

Brings his virtue to perfection (Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2009)

Ven. Buddhaghosa did not comment on such non-Buddhist common purification rituals; he incorporated the seven purifications and reinterpreted them in terms of Buddhist doctrinal points. His impactful recontextualization and reinterpretation of Brahmanic concepts and practices within Buddhism can be observed in his commentaries on the *Vatthūpama Sutta* (Trenckner, 1979) and the *Sigalovāda Sutta* (Davids, Rhys, 1982). This is in keeping with the Buddha’s giving new interpretations to many contemporary non-Buddhist Brahmanical concepts and practices, notably in the aforementioned *Vatthūpama* and the *Sigalovāda Sutta*.

We can also consider what *Upatisa* has mentioned about *visuddhi* in the *Vimuttimaggā*. As is clear from the name of his treatise *Vimuttimaggā*, and omitting the term *visuddhi*, *Upatisa* has opted for the *Pāli* term *Vimutti* instead. The concept of purification runs through all the chapters in the *Vis*. Beginning with *sīla*, Ven. Buddhaghosa continued his commentary on the three trainings, *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, and *Paññā*, culminating in the account of *Ñāṇadassana Visuddhi*. In contrast, the *Vimuttimaggā* presents a different division of chapters, with

Upatissa addressing only two of the *Visuddhis* (purifications)—*Diṭṭhi Visuddhi* (Purity of View) and *Kaṅkhāvitarana Visuddhi* (Purity of Transcending Doubt) in Chapter XII (Bapat, P.V. 2009). Thus, it is obvious that although the *Vimuttimaggā* does not differ much from the subject matter and approach of the *Visuddhimaggā*, *Upatissa* has not adopted a plan like Ven. *Buddhaghosa*'s work delineates the Path of Purification distinctively. Ven. *Buddhaghosa* begins his work with the verse:

Having established morality, a wise person cultivates mind and understanding.

An ardent and discerning monk, He will disentangle the defilements' knot (Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, 2010)

The verse above sets the foundational theme of his work, which Ven. *Buddhaghosa* subsequently elaborates. Next, he introduces another verse containing the deity's question:

Inside are the worn-out rags, and outside are the rags worn by the masses.
I ask you, *Gotama*, who is the one who truly discards these rags?
(Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, 2010)

Subsequently, Ven. *Buddhaghosa* offers a detailed explanation of these verses, elucidating their deeper meaning and linking them to the central theme of the *Path of Purification*. Similarly, *Upatissa* also quotes a *Pāli* opening verse in *Vimuttimaggā*:

Sīlam samādhi paññā ca vimutti ca anuttarā
Anubuddhā ime dhammā gotamena yassassinā

Virtue, concentration, wisdom, and the peerless freedom, to these verily awoke, illustrious *Gotama* (*Upatissa Thera*, 1961)

Commenting on this verse, *Upatissa* says: "To reach the other shore, *nibbāna*, one must also understand the path that leads there. It is essential to inquire into the teachings of the *Sutta*, *Abhidhamma*, and *Vinaya*. My task is to guide you along the way to deliverance. Listen attentively to what I have to say." (*Upatissa Thera*, 1961)

This categorical statement clarifies that *Upatissa* intends to impart the way to deliverance (*Vimutti*). Deliverance is a synonym of *Nibbāna*. Moreover, what is especially interesting is that *Upatissa* refers directly to 'Sīla, Samādhi, and Paññā' – the three trainings that Ven. *Buddhaghosa* meticulously explicates throughout his treatise. Therefore, in both *Visuddhimmaggā* and *Vimuttimaggā*, the three pillars of Buddhist practice - *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, and *Paññā* form the foundation where the entire works are built. Ven. *Buddhaghosa*, after a brief

account of the Buddha's answer on the monks who were not knowledgeable about the path to *Nibbāna* or disentangling the tangle says:

To them I shall expound the comforting Path
of Purification, pure in expositions.” (Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, 2010)

Ven. *Buddhaghosa* further asserts that by doing so, he would follow the accepted tradition of the *Mahāvihāra*. In his treatise on purification, the venerable refers to the Path of Purification as the ‘comforting path’. In the same preamble, he explains;

‘Herein, purification should be understood as *Nibbāna*, devoid of all stains and is

utterly pure.’ (Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, 2010)

The quotations above from the *Vimuttimaggā* and *Visuddhimagga*, both highly acclaimed treatises on *Theravāda* Buddhist meditation, clearly indicate the aim of the two authors as expounding the path to *Nibbāna*; regardless of whatever term refers to, ‘deliverance’ or ‘purification’, *Nibbāna* is meant.

Salient Features of the *Satta Visuddhi*:

All seven *visuddhis* or purifications are related to the mind. Starting with ‘Virtues’ and ending with ‘knowledge and vision,’ culminating in the essential stage in mental development for attaining the final release of *Nibbāna*, which is also referred to as *Paññā* or wisdom. The last three *visuddhis* are interestingly connected to *Ñāṇadassana*. Hence, the four preceding *visuddhis* serve as the foundation for the final ‘knowledge and vision’. Both of these terms, ‘knowledge’ and ‘vision’, have frequently been emphasized in the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha uses terms such as ‘*cakkhu*’, ‘*ñāṇa*’, ‘*āloka*’, ‘*vijjā*’, etc., to indicate knowledge, and the term ‘*diṭṭhi*’ for vision. Hence, the most significant teaching, the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* (Noble Eightfold Path), begins with *Sammā Diṭṭhi* (right view). Without correct vision or insight, one cannot progress to *Samādhi*. To attain *Samādhi*, one must follow the right path through the stages of the Noble Eightfold Path. Without proper understanding, advancing on this path is impossible.

Then, as we scrutinize the *satta Visuddhi*, seven purifications, we shall see that they begin with *sīla* or Virtues. The Buddha, in his reply to the Deity in the *Jaṭṭa Sutta*, started with the expression *sīle patitṭhāya naro sapañño*, the wise man establishing himself on the ‘*Sīla*’... On many other occasions, too, the Buddha highlights the significance of being moral or observing the *Sīla*, for attaining

Nibbāna. The best example may be the five precepts or the *pañcasīla*. One who observes the five precepts throughout his life is a real Buddhist.

And even the widely acknowledged *Sabbapāpassa akaranam*, (Hinuber, O Von and Norman, K.R, 1995) advocates the concept of observing ‘*Sīla*’; this is because if one abstains from all kinds of *Pāpa* (*evil*) he is a *Sīlavā*; or a man of moral practice who does not violate any precepts. Some modern scholars of Buddhism have also observed how *Sīla* serves as the cornerstone for treading the path of purification in Buddhism:

On the basis of developing *Dāna*, the Buddhist cultivates *Sīla* (virtue) by observing ethical precepts, the most common of which are the ‘five virtues’ (*Pañca-sīlāni*). The avowal of each of these begins with ‘I undertake the rule of training to abstain from ...’. Each precept is a ‘rule of training’ - as is each item of the monastic code - which is a promise or vow to oneself. They are not commandments from without, though their difference from these, in practice, can be done by a lay person at any time; they are frequently ‘taken’ by chanting them after a monk, who fulfills the role of ‘administering’ them (Harvey, Peter, 2013).

However, we know that in the true sense of the Buddha’s teachings, one must not grasp the ‘*Sīla*’ as well, over-dependence on *Sīla* could be a *Samyojana*, a fetter – (*Sīlabbata parāṃsā*) - Nyanatiloka Thero in the Buddhist Dictionary explains as follows:

Sīlabbata-parāṃsā (clinging to mere rules and rituals) is the third of the ten fetters (*Samyojana*) and one of the four types of clinging (*Upādāna*). It is eradicated upon attaining stream entry (*Sotāpanna*). For further details, see *Upādāna*, (Nyanatiloka Thera 2004).

Accordingly, *Sīla* can be translated as rules. In other contexts, although we normally use the English terms ‘precepts’ or ‘principles’, the term ‘rules’ can also be applied. In observation of the ‘five, eight, or ten precepts’, for example, there is a declaration that one abstains from ‘killing, lying, taking intoxicants, etc. One commits oneself to abide by them as rules of training. However, one is not legally bound to observe the *Sīla*-rules (also known as *Sikkhāpada*). No king or any other ruler punishes the violator in general. However, one will be punished for misconduct and violating a country's legislative rules. Observing *Sīla*, such as ‘celibacy, abstaining from taking alcoholic drinks, enjoying dancing, singing, or telling lies’ are observed and practiced at one’s own free will, with no pressure from a ruler or a superior lord. This is further evident from the fact that those who violate the precepts are disciplined according to the Buddhist Vinaya, as

stipulated in the Pātimokkha and other related texts. The *bhikkhus* must observe and live in accordance with the Vinaya rules; violators are deemed unqualified or undeserving to continue as '*bhikkhus*'. For progress on the Path of Purification, *bhikkhus* must be of immaculate conduct. *Padmasiri de Silva* observes the significance of Buddhist ethics based on *Sīla* and the threefold training, highlighting their relevance to modern psychology:

The doctrine of the Buddha clearly accommodates the interlacing of the psychological and the ethical aspects of behavior. The closest to this in the history of Western ethics would be Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. The development of virtue is not merely blind adherence to rules, but the development of a certain type of skill (*kusala*). Virtue has to be developed by the cultivation of good habits and continuous self-analysis.

Buddhist ethics is not limited to the analysis of ethical concepts and theories, but also recommends a way of life and patterns of conduct (De Silva, Padmasiri, 1999).

Moreover, an immoral person will not progress on the path to deliverance. Therefore, everyone must undergo the Threefold Training (*Tividha-Sikkhā*), frequently mentioned and explained in the Buddhist canon. The three *Sikkhā*' are: *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, and *Paññā*. The seven stages of purification or the *satta Visuddhi* are built upon the three *Sikkhā*. Hence, the first *Visuddhi* is *Sīla* and the seventh is *Paññā* - wisdom. The seventh *Visuddhi*, *Ñāṇadassana*, means 'knowledge and vision' and directly corresponds to *Paññā*, or 'wisdom.' The Pāli word *Ñāṇa* encompasses wisdom, knowledge, intelligence, and related qualities. Peter Harvey has also emphasized the significance of *Sīla* or virtue in his impressive interpretation of Buddhist ethics:

In Buddhism, moral virtue is the foundation of the spiritual path, though a fixed *attachment* to ethical precepts and vows is seen as a hindering 'fetter'. Virtue generates freedom from remorse, and this leads on through gladness and joy to meditative calm, insight and liberation. While this model of ethics as part of a 'path' predominates, it is modified in some *Mahāyāna* schools, particularly in Japan. Here, *SOTO ZEN* sees Virtues as the making manifest of one's innate Buddha nature, while *JODO-SHIN* sees it as simply expressing gratitude to *Amitābha* for having saved one, (Harvey, Peter, 2013).

The Practical Importance of the Seven Purifications in Modern Society

In his translation of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, Walshe quotes the Buddha, “There are, monks, other matters, profound, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond mere thought, subtle, to no experienced by the wise, which the *Tathāgata*, having realized them by his own super-knowledge, proclaims, and about which those who would truthfully praise the *Tathāgata* would rightly speak.” (Walshe, Murice, 1987).

Right from the time of the Buddha, his doctrine or philosophy has been known as difficult for ordinary people to understand. The *doctrine of Dependent Origination*, for instance, even proved difficult for experienced senior bhikkhus like Ananda (attendant to almost all of the Buddha’s discourses). In the *Theravāda* tradition, it is known that the Buddha hesitated after his enlightenment, knowing that it would be a mere waste of time and effort to expound the precious *Dhamma* to the world. Gods had to intervene to persuade the Buddha to teach the *Dhamma*. Moreover, on another occasion, the Buddha had considered the ‘higher doctrine’, the *Abhidhamma*, metaphysics as some would have it, had first to be taught to the gods in *Tāvātimsa* heaven. Thus, although thousands may gather to listen to the *Dhamma*, it would have been a wonder or revolution among the adherents of other religious traditions, ascetics, and philosophers. This is because the Buddha’s unprecedented teachings revealed a novel attitude to the social problems of his time. It is a well-established fact that the Buddha rejected the age-old, deeply ingrained caste system in Indian society of his day, opening an unprecedented door in his dispensation to all, regardless of creed or belief.

Furthermore, the historical Buddha distinctly advocated a moderate lifestyle, avoiding extremes in his religious principles, and promulgated equally moderate *sangha* disciplinary rules for his disciples. In addition, his religion was based on peace and harmony among fellow practitioners and encouraged love and loving kindness toward all living beings. The Buddha has maintained his cardinal expositions, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and Dependent Origination, since the very beginning of his mission, and encouraged listeners to strive to attain *Nibbāna*.

This *Dhamma*, referred to as *duddaso, duranbodho, atakkāvacharo* (difficult to see, difficult to understand, difficult to comprehend by logic), which was *Svākkhāto* (well expounded) by the Buddha, is simply the ‘Path of Purification’

or the ‘way to complete liberation’ or *Nibbāna*. Every word uttered by the historical Buddha was aimed at helping his listeners to progress along the Path of Purification to reach *Nibbāna*. *Bhikkhu Anālyo* opines in the article quoted above that these stages or *Visuddhis* may not be of sequential order; their arising, all or some simultaneously in the mind of ardent practitioners, is possible. However, in the *Visuddhimagga*, Ven. *Buddhaghosa* presents a sequential process for the seven purifications to be realized one by one, as in the seven relays depicted in the *Rathavināta Sutta*. Caution is to be exercised, even by reaching the seventh *Visuddhi*, i.e., *Ñāṇa-Dassana*, we must consider carefully whether *Nibbāna* is attained. *Ñāṇa* can be taken as a synonym of *Paññā*, which is the third stage in the three *Sikkhā* or training, although *Paññā* or wisdom is conceptualized as *Nibbāna* generally. It would be instrumental now to quote Venerable *Nyanatiloka Thera*:

By this stage of purification is meant the penetrating and experiential knowledge of the four supramundane paths (*magga-ñāṇa*), namely: ..., and the path of Arahantship (*arahanta magga*).

“As soon as every form of existence has appeared to the mind as an obstacle, then, immediately after the adaptation knowledge (*anuloma-ñāṇa*), there arises the maturity knowledge *Gotrabhūñāṇa*. And while taking as the object without a sign, the standstill, the non-becoming, the cessation, *Nibbāna*, this knowledge transcends the rank (*Gotta-gotra*), name, and sphere of the worldling (*Puthujjana*) and enters into the rank, name, and sphere of the noble ones (*Ariya*), and thereby forms the first turning towards *Nibbāna* as an object, the first thinking about it, the first concentration on it. This, therefore, is the mature knowledge, which forms the summit of insight and never arises a second time.” (Nyanatiloka Thero, 2010)

Nyanatiloka Thero offers this exposition of the *Ñāṇadassana Visuddhi* according to the *Vis.* interpretation. Therefore, we can take it as authoritative. Thus, his holding of ‘the summit of insight and never arises a second time’ implies that, as the final stage in the order of the seven purities, *Ñāṇadassana* can be considered to equate attainment of *Nibbāna*. Following is the observation of *Bhikkhu Anālayo* on the relationship of ‘knowledge and vision’ to the ‘final goal’ or *Nibbāna*:

“These instances indicate that the expression “knowledge and vision” can connote a variety of different realizations and do not necessarily imply the realization of *Nibbāna*. In fact, judging from its usage in the

Mahāsāropama and the *Cūlasāropama Suttas*, “knowledge and vision” refers only to a stage leading up to, but not identical to the realization. These two discourses are of particular relevance in the present context, since they are concerned with the same issue that also forms the central topic of the *Rathavinīta Sutta*, the goal of living the holy life. The *Mahāsāropama* and *Cūlasāropama Sutta* agree with the *Rathavinīta Sutta* that neither pure virtues, nor deep concentration, nor the achievement of “knowledge and vision” should be mistaken for the final goal, (Anālayo, 2014).

As we have observed in the discussion thus far, several aspects of the Satta Visuddhi stand out clearly as a method or “project” for individuals interested in attaining liberation or Nibbāna, as taught by the Buddha. We saw above that *Upatissa*, in the *Vimuttimaggā*, states upfront that one needs a good knowledge of the Tipiṭaka to understand the Path of Purification encompassing all three *Sikkhā* or trainings. This shows that the seven purifications are essentially religious and purposeful. Nevertheless, the seven-purifications scheme is helpful for non-monastic practitioners through daily progress in their Dhamma-faring. Although not all seven factors are directly related to lay life, key elements such as *Sīla*, *Citta*, *Diṭṭhi*, and *Kaṅkhatarana Visuddhis* (virtue, mind, view, and doubt purifications), for example, would be of great benefit for their day-to-day activities, too.

If one fails to discern between the right and wrong paths, they may fall prey to hazards and risk perishing. Conversely, an individual of impeccable morality can become well-regarded in society and, internally, cultivate a pure mind, living with ease, free from stress and mental issues. *Diṭṭhi*, or vision, is essential for both religious and laypersons. For instance, if a layperson becomes entangled in conflicting views, he may be misguided; he risks his downfall in daily activities, being influenced by harmful individuals and drawn into crimes. Thus, when we consider the seven purifications individually, we can see how the concept of *Visuddhi* can be applied to the lives of householders, helping them succeed in their plans for progress. This applies to a community or even a country in its pursuit of progress. For example, the most important *Visuddhi* among the seven is *Ñāṇadassana*, or ‘Knowledge and Vision.’ Similarly, for a country’s development, its rulers must have a clear understanding of their objectives, aims, and targets to guide the progress of their nation. Rulers must also have a clear ‘vision’ for the progress and future of their countries, as well as for fostering harmonious co-existence with neighboring nations. Without good *citta* and *Diṭṭhi Visuddhi*, mind and vision purifications, developing economic plans for

sustainable growth in a country would be an uphill task. We can say that the *Sattavisuddhi* is a cardinal doctrine in Buddhism that embeds the potential to address spiritual and physical problems in our lives.

Further examples of the Buddha's intervention or attitude to worldly problems and issues can be found in various *sutras* and stories in the Buddhist canon. For example, we can consider some instances reported in the *Saṅgāma Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, (Feer, M Leon, 1991). In this discourse, we find two contemporary kings of India waging war. In the first instance, King *Ajātasattu* emerges victorious, but in the second, King *Kosala* wins and captures *Ajātasattu* alive. On both occasions, the Buddha states his views on victory and defeat in war. At the end of the *Sutta*, the Buddha makes a now-famous statement: Victory breeds enmity, the defeated one sleeps poorly, but the peaceful one sleeps at ease, having abandoned victory and defeats (Bodhi, Bhikkhu, 2000). This remains true even now; much of the world's misery and disasters stem from greed and ignorance. Those overwhelmed by greed for victory (success) inflict pain on others and harm both animal and plant life. As seen in this verse. –*Jayam veram pasavati* (victory breeds enmity), the ultimate goal should be 'peace'. This pursuit of peace aligns with the *Visuddhi* attained through the seven stages of purification discussed earlier in this article.

Among the seven *Visuddhis* (purifications), the third, *Diṭṭhi Visuddhi*, is of great importance, as the vast majority would readily succumb to false beliefs. People are easily deceived or misled by fake philosophers, fake religious masters, and fake religious and the like. As discussed above, by the time of the Buddha, the world was already full of pseudo-philosophers and fraudulent leaders of various cults. This is well explained in the *Sattajaṭila Sutta* (Feer, M Leon, 1991) in the *Samyutta Nikāya*. In this discourse, while conversing with the Buddha, King *Pasenadi of Kosala* sees a group of *Jaṭilas* passing by, all of whom appear to be of high spiritual attainment. The king turns toward the *Jaṭilas*, kneels, and salutes them, announcing his name aloud. Next, he tells the Buddha that these are respectable and holy figures of high spiritual attainment. Nevertheless, the Buddha remains unimpressed. Eventually, the king confesses otherwise to the Buddha. He reveals that these men are not truly spiritual but are spies in his service, disguised as holy men.

This incident is a valuable lesson for people in the modern world who still fall prey to and are misled by fake and fraudulent individuals. Some monks claim to have attained the *arahant* stage, and there are even self-proclaimed pseudo-Buddhas in certain Buddhist countries. However, if people are well informed and

educated, they can avoid being misled by such individuals. To this end, we can see purities of *Sīla* (virtue), *Citta* (mind), *Diṭṭhi* (view), and *Maggāmagga-ñāṇa-dassana* (knowledge of the path and non-path) can be highly instructive. In the *Jaṭila Sutta*, the Buddha offers crucial advice on identifying a genuine, virtuous person. He tells King *Pasenadi*: “O King, you are a householder, living at home with your wives and children, overwhelmed by fivefold sensual pleasure. Someone like you can't ascertain whether a person is truly an arahant.

Living together and through prolonged association is the only way to discern whether a person is genuinely virtuous. This understanding cannot be achieved quickly; it requires a long-term relationship to evaluate someone's character. In *Bhikkhu Anālayo's* captivating article on the Seven Purifications, he accentuates that the purifications described by *Buddhagosa* in the *Visuddhimagga* do not signify the final stage of purification. *Anālayo* argues that the seventh *Visuddhi* (purification), known as ‘Knowledge and Vision’, represents a very advanced stage in spiritual development rather than *Nibbāna*. Drawing on the Chinese *Rathavināta Sutta* and the *Dasuttara Sutta*, he illustrates that further progress is necessary to achieve ultimate spiritual goals, even at an advanced stage of spiritual development.

The remainder of their discussion makes it quite clear that in the eyes of both *Sāriputta* and *Puṇṇa*, this scheme of seven purifications was incomplete as an account of the purification process. According to the chariot simile found in all three versions, just as when mounting the seventh chariot, the goal of the journey is still to be reached, so too with the seventh stage of purification, the final goal of the purification process is still to be attained.

Taking into consideration *Puṇṇa's* explicit statement in the Chinese and *Pāli* Versions of the *Rathavināta Sutta* that the seventh stage of purification is still affected by clinging (*sa-upādāna*) and thus cannot be regarded as the final goal, interpreting the seventh stage as encompassing all four levels of awakening as proposed in the *Visuddhimagga* appears intriguing and can be controversial, perhaps (*Anālayo, 2014*).

Pondering various modern and traditional interpretations of the *Rathavināta Sutta*, its essence seems relevant to the supra-mundane spiritual goal of *nibbāna*, and welfare and development in mundane life. As discussed earlier, maintaining balance in worldly affairs, avoiding extremes, and staying in the “middle” can achieve both mundane and supra-mundane objectives.

This is evident from popular discourses in the *Tipiṭaka*, such as the *Sigālovāda Sutta* and the *Vyagghapajja Sutta* (*Hardy, 1958*), as well as various

sutras found in the Five *Nikāya*. In these texts, gods and humans, including kings like *Ajātasattu* and *Pasenadi Kosala*, approach the Buddha with issues they face in their personal and state affairs. The Buddha offers solutions based on his basic doctrines related to the three trainings: *Sīla* (virtue), *Samādhi* (meditation), and *Paññā* (wisdom). In his discussions with laypersons, the Buddha normally focuses on the *Sīla* or the purification of virtues. For some individuals, he would start his discourse with the 'five precepts' and gradually progress to more advanced stages.

As we have seen, the seven purifications are inherent within cardinal doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, and *Paṭicca-Samuppāda*. Most of the Buddha's discourses are related to these teachings. In the *Tiṭṭaka*, there are examples where the Buddha refers directly to *Jhāna* and *Nibbāna* only with *Bhikkhū*, monks who have made some progress on the path to *Nibbāna*. As recorded in some *sutta* texts in the *Samyutta Nikāya* and *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha teaches large groups of *Bhikkhū*, monks during his travels across the country. When he stops for the night, the *Bhikkhū* will gather around him to listen to his teachings. The Buddha always invites them to raise their doubts and questions; the consistent depiction highlights the importance of purification through overcoming doubts. Doubt-clarification is essential for monastics and non-monastics alike; a mind burdened with doubts can hinder success whether mundane or supra-mundane pursuits.

As clearly illustrated in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (David Rhys & Estlin Carpenter, 1966), just before his *Mahāparinibbāna*, the Buddha urges the *Bhikkhūs* to clarify any doubts or issues concerning his teachings. The crucial role of clarifying doubts about the spiritual goal of *Nibbāna* is highlighted here. When we apply this doubt-clarifying principle to worldly affairs, we can observe that many problems in human society and between nations arise from doubt and suspicion. The Buddha has a profound understanding of the human mind.

His multifarious teachings show that the historical Buddha, with his profound understanding of the workings of the human mind, mastered a diversity of knowledge, attuned to human predicaments, offered timeless solutions, and discovered the ancient path of purification. In our discussion on the seven purifications, we note that the third *Visuddhi*, *Diṭṭhi Visuddhi*, holds utmost significance. *Sammā Diṭṭhi*, the 'Right or Perfect View,' is consistently emphasized by the Buddha as the foremost link in the Noble Eightfold Path. In contemporary societies, people often encounter difficulties embracing the 'wrong' or 'imperfect views.' People usually struggle to discern the right views

because they are entangled in the wrong ones. The tendency to adopt incorrect views is prevalent among human beings. While some intelligent individuals were pleased, the greater multitude were attracted to wrong views taught by the heretical teachers, the Jain tradition leaders, and Brahmins with unfounded age-old rituals and sacrifices.

Teachers of wrong views were assailing the multitude with their beliefs, attracting them to their creeds through popular practices such as severe asceticism and sacrifices. Hence, the Buddha, when questioned by a group of men known as the *Kālāma*, taught the famous *Kālāma Sutta* (Hardy, 1979). In this discourse, the historical Buddha advises against being easily swayed by others' ideas. Instead, he encourages individuals to critically evaluate and verify all views to determine whether they lead to the right path. The Buddha advised the *Kālāmas* against believing anything merely because it was taught by a teacher, friend, or relative. This *sutta* remains highly regarded amongst modern scholars for its sound and sensible guidance. Thus, it is evident that the essence of the Buddha's teachings is firmly grounded in the 'seven steps of purification,' which remain relevant and applicable in contemporary contexts.

As in the *Kālāma Sutta*, so it is in many other *suttas*, the Buddha has advised his followers and disciples not to be deceived by the words of 'tricksters', and whosoever genuinely keen on treading the path to purification should abide by the ancient path he discovered because that is only way *ekāyano ayam bhikkhave maggo* i.e. The Four Noble Truths, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Noble Eight-fold Path especially.

In the *Kālāma Sutta*, as in many other *suttas*, the Buddha advises his followers and disciples not to be misled by the words of 'tricksters'. Those genuinely keen on the path of purification should adhere to the ancient path he discovered, as it is the only way: '*ekāyano ayam bhikkhave maggo*'. This path includes the Four Noble Truths, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, and especially the Noble Eightfold Path.

Nevertheless, the Buddha's path to deliverance, or Nibbāna, is not meant solely for religious purposes. The path offers solutions to everyday problems. In light of the several discourses above, the Buddha's attitude and approach in addressing worldly issues, with guidance for the welfare of householders, are distinct. The primary focus of Buddhism might be spiritual development for the ordained; the historical Buddha was available for the laity. Kings, wealthy householders, bankers, traders, or anyone engaged in trade were the lay supporters of the Buddha and *saṅgha*.

Millionaire merchants and bankers, such as *Anāthapiṇḍika*, generously provided the Buddha with comfortable dwelling places known as *ārāma*. The biography of the Buddha shows that he spent much of his life in cities, towns, and prosperous villages that could support him and his disciples. As previously mentioned, the Buddha advised kings like *Kosala*, *Ajātasattu*, and *Bimbisāra* on various matters, including dealing with invasions. Similarly, the Brahmins and *Jaṭilas* (wandering ascetics) approached him with questions about philosophical and doctrinal issues. Generally, the Buddha served as a guide, teacher, and peacemaker, as demonstrated by his intervention in the conflict between the *Sakyas* and *Koliyas*.

In examining the diverse facets of the historical Buddha's life, it is important to remember that he was *Mahākāruṇiko*, the Great Compassionate One, and the teacher for the entire universe, or *Satthā*. Thus, it is clear that the seven purifications encompass principal Buddhist doctrines that hold practical significance for addressing contemporary issues.

Conclusion

The exploration of the Seven Purifications (*Satta-Visuddhi*) as outlined in Ven. Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* demonstrates their profound relevance not only in the context of *Theravāda* Buddhism but also in addressing contemporary societal challenges. The Seven Purifications provide a structured path toward ethical living, mental clarity, and profound wisdom, aligning with the Buddha's core teachings.

Key aspects such as the importance of *Sīla* (virtue) as the foundation for all spiritual practices, the cultivation of *Samādhi* (concentration), and the attainment of *Paññā* (wisdom) reflect a holistic approach to personal development. In modern society, these principles can guide people in making ethical decisions, fostering mental well-being, and developing a clear vision that contributes to harmonious coexistence.

Moreover, the emphasis on *Diṭṭhi* (right view) and the importance of discerning truth from falsehood resonate strongly in an age characterized by misinformation and conflicting ideologies. The teachings encourage critical thinking and a proactive stance against unverified beliefs, promoting a more informed and compassionate society.

Finally, the Seven Purifications serve as a timeless framework that can guide individuals and communities toward personal growth and collective well-being, reinforcing the Buddha's vision of achieving *Nibbāna* while addressing the practicalities of everyday life. The integration of these teachings into modern

contexts can lead to not only individual transformation but also to broader societal change, fostering a world rooted in peace, understanding, and mutual respect.

Body of Knowledge

The Seven Purifications, as elucidated in the *Visuddhimagga* by Ven. Buddhaghosa Thera serve as a transformative framework for ethical and spiritual development, beginning with the Purification of Virtue (*Sīla*) and progressing through stages that include the Purification of Mind (*Citta*), Purification of View (*Diṭṭhi*), Purification of Overcoming Doubt (*Kaṅkhāvitarāṇa*), and culminating in the Purification of Knowledge and Vision (*Ñānadassana*), Knowledge of the Path (*Magga-ñāṇa*), and Knowledge of Fruition (*Phala-ñāṇa*). Each stage emphasizes essential aspects of personal development, such as ethical conduct, mental clarity, and deep insights into the nature of reality, ultimately leading to the experience of *Nibbāna*. In contemporary society, these purifications offer valuable insights that can enhance individual well-being and foster ethical behavior across communities, education, and the corporate sector. By integrating these principles, individuals can cultivate virtues that promote integrity and empathy, while practices of concentration and the right view can alleviate stress, reduce conflict, and contribute to a harmonious environment. Thus, the Seven Purifications encapsulate a timeless methodology for achieving personal and societal well-being, guiding individuals toward enlightenment and a more compassionate existence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Seven Purifications outlined in the *Visuddhimagga* offer a comprehensive approach to spiritual and ethical development that is both profound and applicable to modern life. By initiating the journey with the Purification of Virtue (*Sīla*), individuals lay a foundation rooted in ethical conduct, which not only nurtures personal integrity but also cultivates social harmony. Progressing through the subsequent stages encourages deeper mental clarity, a reformed understanding of reality, and the cultivation of wisdom. This transformative process finally culminates in the realization of *Nibbāna*, marking the aspirant's profound inner liberation and understanding.

Furthermore, the relevance of the Seven Purifications extends into various aspects of contemporary society, where their teachings can be seamlessly integrated into education, psychology, and leadership practices. Emphasizing virtues, concentration, and the right perspective can significantly enhance mental

well-being and promote compassionate relationships among individuals and communities. By promoting these principles, society can benefit from increased empathy, reduced conflict, and a collective pursuit of enlightenment. The timeless nature of the Seven Purifications makes them an invaluable framework for guiding individuals towards a more harmonious, ethical, and enlightened existence in an increasingly complex world.

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