

The Four Close Placements of Mindfulness in Mahayana - Dr. Alexander Berzin

The 37 Factors Leading to a Purified State

The four close placements of mindfulness (*dran-pa nyer-bzhag*, Skt. *smrtyupasthana*, Pali: *satipatthana*) are the first four of the 37 factors leading to a purified state (*byang-chub yan-lag so-bdun*). There are three purified states (*byang-chub*, Skt. *bodhi*) – that of a shravaka arhat, a pratyekabuddha arhat, and a bodhisattva arhat or Buddha.

The 37 are:

The four close placements of mindfulness (*dran-pa nyer-bzhag bzhi*) – on the body, feelings of levels of happiness, the mind, and phenomena

The four factors for (attaining) correct riddances (*yang-dag spong-ba bzhi*, four pure abandonments) – generating constructive (virtuous) phenomena not generated before, generating constructive phenomena already generated, stopping the further increase of destructive (nonvirtuous) phenomena already generated, and preventing the generation of destructive phenomena not yet generated

The four legs for (attaining) extraphysical powers (*rdzu-'phrul-gyi rkang-pa bzhi*) – intention ('*dun-pa*), perseverance, pondering (*sems-pa*, thinking), scrutiny (*dpyod-pa*, analysis)

The five powers (*dbang-po lnga*) – belief in fact (*dad-pa*, faith), perseverance, mindfulness, absorbed concentration (*ting-nge-'dzin*), and discriminating awareness (*shes-rab*, wisdom)

The five forces (*stobs-linga*) – belief in fact, perseverance, mindfulness, absorbed concentration, and discriminating awareness

The seven (causal) factors for (attaining) a purified state (*byang-chub yan-lag bdun*) – mindfulness, thorough sorting of phenomena (*chos rab-tu rnam-par 'byed-pa*), perseverance, zest (*dga'-ba*, fresh joyous interest), sense of physical and mental fitness (*shin-sbyangs*), absorbed concentration, and even-mindedness (*btang-snyoms*, equanimity)

The eight branches of an arya pathway mind ('*phags-lam yan-lag brgyad*, eightfold noble path) – right view, right thought, right speech, right boundary of action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right absorbed concentration.

The 37 summarize practices progressively undertaken by shravakas, pratyekabuddhas, and

bodhisattvas in common as they develop the five pathway minds (*lam-lnga*, five paths). They are directed at the four noble truths – true suffering, causes, stoppings (true cessations), and pathway minds (true paths) – and are aspects of an exceptionally perceptive state of mind (*lhag-mthong*, Skt. *vipashyana*, Pali: *vipassana*).

A Building-Up Pathway Mind

The four close placements of mindfulness are practiced from first achieving the first of the five pathway minds, a building-up pathway mind (*tshogs-lam*, path of accumulation), all the way through the attainment of a purified state of arhatship or Buddhahood. We may practice a facsimile of the four, however, before achieving a building-up pathway mind.

With a building-up pathway mind, we build up the networks of positive force (*bsod-nams-kyi tshogs*, collection of merit) and of deep awareness (*ye-shes-kyi tshogs*, collection of wisdom). They are liberation-building or enlightenment-building, depending on the motivation that accompanies them: renunciation (*nges-'byung*) or both renunciation and the enlightening aim of bodhichitta (*byang-sems*). Meditation on the four close placements builds up a network of deep awareness, while the accompanying motivation builds up a network of positive force. The meditation and motivation reinforce each other.

Shravaka and pratyekabuddha pathway minds practice the four close placements while simultaneously having manifest unlabored renunciation (*rtsol-med nges-'byung*). Several cognitions can be manifest simultaneously, each focused on a different object and cognitively taken in a different manner. For example, we can see someone's face while simultaneously hearing the person speak. We do not necessarily pay equal attention to all our simultaneously occurring cognitions. Absorbed concentration on an object within a single cognition is free of all mental wandering, but that does not mean that the concentration occurs without having other simultaneous cognitions. We are merely not distracted by them.

Renunciation is the determination to gain liberation from uncontrollably recurring rebirth (*samsara*), with the willingness to give up the suffering of *samsara* and its causes. Accompanying it is the conviction that it is possible to do so, that we are personally capable of doing so, and that we shall work to do so. Thus, renunciation has a basic understanding of the four noble truths.

Determination to gain liberation understands the third and fourth noble truths: true stoppings and true pathway minds. Willingness to give up suffering and its causes understands the first and second

noble truths: true sufferings and their true causes. "Unlabored" means that renunciation arises without having to build it up through relying on a line of reasoning. Always being manifest means that we never lose our conviction and intention.

Bodhisattva pathway minds practice the four close placements of mindfulness while simultaneously having two manifest cognitions: unlabored renunciation and unlabored bodhichitta. Bodhichitta focuses on our future enlightenment and has two intentions accompanying it: to achieve that enlightenment and to benefit others by means of that attainment. Bodhichitta has understanding of the four noble truths in the same way as renunciation has, but now in terms of enlightenment and Buddha-nature. unlabored bodhichitta does not require building up to it through steps such as recognizing everyone as having been our mother, and so forth. Always being manifest means that we never lose our aim and intentions.

Although the actual four close placements of mindfulness are with unlabored renunciation and bodhichitta, we can begin with labored (*rtsol-bcas*) levels of them before attaining a building-up pathway mind. For this, we need to work ourselves up to generating and feeling sincere renunciation and bodhichitta by relying on lines of reasoning.

Types of Mental Factors Involved with Close Placement of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a mental factor (*sems-byung*, subsidiary awareness) that holds on to an object of focus and prevents forgetfulness or loss of it. It functions somewhat like mental glue. The strength of the mental hold can vary. It needs to be neither too tight nor too loose.

Introspective alertness (*shes-bzhin*) is the mental factor or subsidiary awareness of an object that checks the quality of the mental hold of mindfulness. The hold may be too loose due to flightiness of mind (*rgod-pa*, agitation) or mental dullness (*bying-ba*). When alertness notices a fault in the quality of mindfulness, it triggers restoring attention (*chad-cing 'jug-pa'i yid-byed*) to correct it.

Attention or taking to mind (*yid-la byed-pa*) is the mental factor subsidiary awareness that engages mental activity with a specific object. It may engage the mental activity in a painstaking, restoring, uninterrupted, or spontaneous manner. It may also take to mind or consider the object in a certain way – either concordantly (*tshul-bcas*) or discordantly (*tshul-min*) with their actual natures.

The four close placements of mindfulness are practiced to correct the four discordant ways of paying attention to the five aggregate factors of our experience (*phung-po lnga*, five aggregates). With the proper mental hold of mindfulness, we practice regarding:

Our bodies – as unclean (impure, ugly), rather than as clean (pure, beautiful)

Our feelings – as suffering (unsatisfying), rather than as happiness (satisfying)

Our minds (referring to our six types of primary consciousness: seeing, hearing, and so on)
– as nonstatic (impermanent), rather than static (permanent)

All phenomena (referring to the various mental factors and to the five aggregate factors in general) – as lacking an impossible soul of a person (*gang-zag-gi bdag-med*), rather than as having one.