

The Mindful Path to Nirvana

Mahabodhi (open to all)

Mindfulness and the "Seven Sets"

According to Cittapala in 'A System of Meditation' (see p35-36,) Bhante based 'a system of meditation' on a traditional formulation known as the Five Paths. These appear, among other places, in the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. The "Five Paths" consist of the "Thirty Seven Wings to Awakening" (*bodhi-pakkhiya dhammas*.) The "wings" are divided into seven "sets" and the "sets" distributed among the Five Paths as follows:

The Path of Accumulation (*sambhara marga*)

Set 1 - The "four foundations of mindfulness" (*satipatthanas*)

Set 2 - The "four right efforts" (*samma ppadhanas*)

Set 3 - The "four bases of success" (*iddhi-padas*)

The Path of Application (*prayoga marga*)

Set 4 - The "five spiritual faculties" (*indriyas*)

Set 5 - The "five powers" (*balas*)

The Path of Seeing (*darsana marga*)

Set 6 - The "seven factors of awakening" (*bojjhngas*)

The Path of Practice (*bhavana marga*)

Set 7 - The "Noble Eightfold Path" (*Ariya-Atthangika-Magga*)

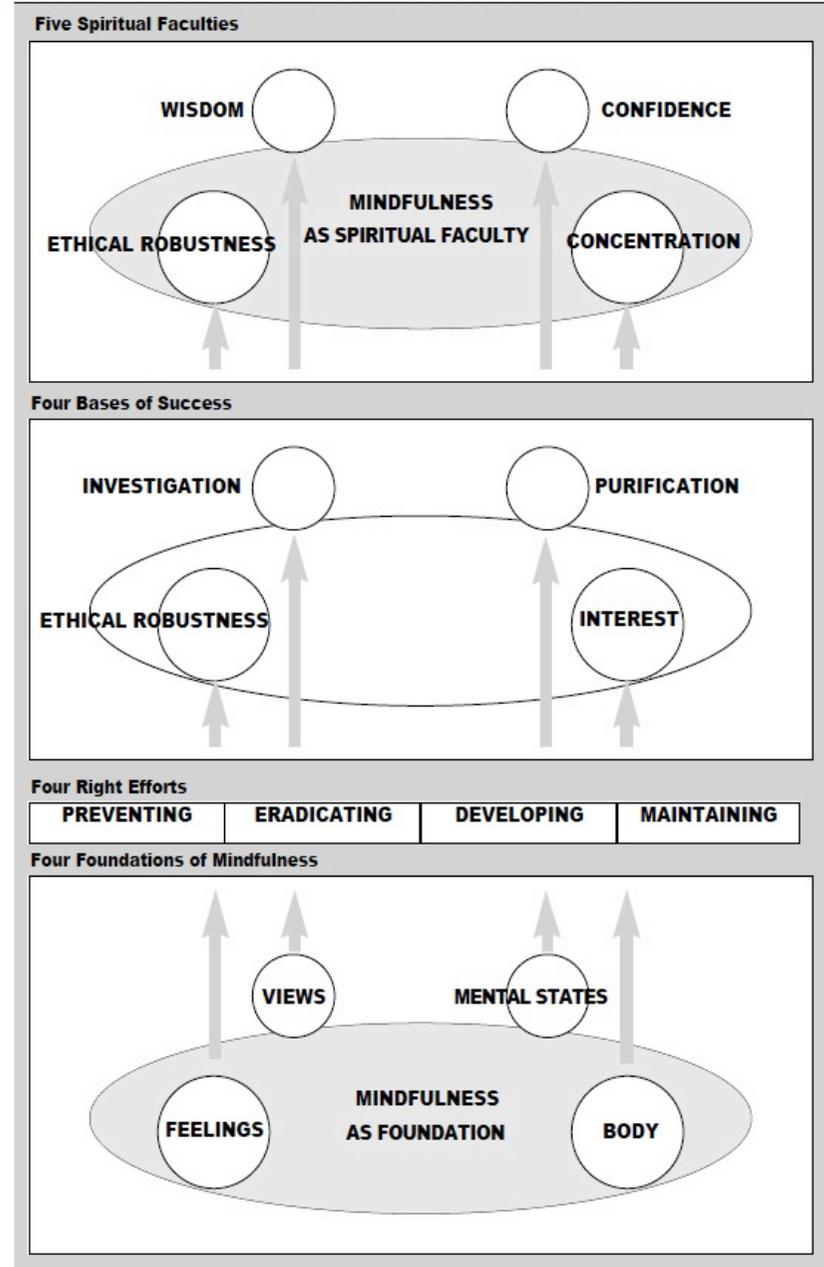
The Path of Fulfilment (*nistha-marga*)

The goal, Nirvana. This isn't really a path, it simply marks Nirvana having been achieved.

Mindfulness appears in "sets 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Mindfulness appears as a foundation (*satipatthana*), as a spiritual faculty (*satindriya*), as a power (*satibala*), as a factor of awakening (*sati-sambojjangh*), and as a perfection (*samma sati*.) Each time it appears it addresses a new level of suffering until at Nirvana there is no more suffering left.

The relationship between the "wings" can be seen in the following diagrams. Fig. 1 represents the whole of the Path of Accumulation and the beginning of the Path of Application.

From mindfulness as a foundation to mindfulness as a spiritual faculty



The Path of Accumulation

The first three "sets:" the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts and the four bases of success, make up the Path of Accumulation. This path addresses and resolves direct and indirect suffering associated with four objects of contemplation: body, feelings, mental states and views. It is called the Path of Accumulation because it is about accumulating positive conditions for happiness in these areas, in particular what Buddhism calls merit (*punya*) and knowledge (*jnana*.) The Path of Accumulation is represented by the lower two boxes in Fig. 1.

The four foundations of mindfulness

The four foundations establish with each object of contemplation whether it is a condition for happiness, because mindfulness always contains a sense of what is skillful (and leading to happiness) and unskillful (leading to suffering.) The four foundations of mindfulness are featured in the lower box in Fig. 3.

The four right efforts

Once the four foundations are established the second 'set:" the four right efforts, represents putting the effort to prevent unskillful states from arising, eradicate those that have arisen, develop skillful states that have not arisen, and maintain those once they are there.

The four bases of success

The third "set", the four bases of success (*iddhi-padas*.) represent this having been successfully achieved. The 'bases of success" are often presented in the Buddhist scriptures as magical powers – the Buddha for instance disappears in one place and reappears in another, or emits jets of water from his body – but we can see descriptions of miracles such as these as metaphors expressing power within the mundane world, which Buddhism sees as falling short of insight. Each "base of success" manifests when we have put energy into maintaining an object in a happy state. So when our meditative focus (*samadhi*) has been on the body and we have successfully created a positive habit (*sankhara*) in the effort (*padhana*) to be skilful, and the result of that is interest (*chanda*.) then the "base of success" we develop there is called *chanda-samadhi-padhana-sankhara*. This will probably have been achieved through preventing and eradicating bodily tension and developing and maintaining bodily relaxation, or good meditation posture, and that will have freed up our attention from the body and allowed our interest to go to other things. It forms the basis for the development of the spiritual faculty of concentration (*samadhi*.) When we develop a consistent habit of preventing and eradicating feelings with an unhappy outcome and of developing and maintaining feelings with a happy outcome, that gives us an ethical robustness in relation to feeling: we are no longer swayed by pleasant feelings with an unhappy outcome. This is the second "base of success," based around ethical robustness and is called *viriya-samadhi-padhana-samskara*, and it forms the basis for the development of the spiritual faculty of ethical robustness (*viriya*.) When we develop a consistent habit of preventing and eradicating mental states with an unhappy outcome and of developing and maintaining emotional and mental states with a happy outcome, then our mind is purified of emotional and mental states that can bring us unhappiness. This is the third "base

of success," based around purification of mind and is called *citta-samadhi-padhana-samskara*, and that forms the basis for the development of the spiritual faculty of confidence-trust (*saddha*.) And when we develop a consistent habit of preventing and eradicating views with an unhappy outcome and developing and maintaining views with a happy outcome, then we have become adept at investigating views and rooting out those that can bring us unhappiness. This is the fourth "base of success," based around "investigation of dhammas" and is called *vimamsa-samadhi-padhana-samskara*, that forms the basis for the development of the spiritual faculty of wisdom (*panna*.)

The Path of Application

So why does there need to be another path *after* the Path of Accumulation? Well, if the problems of life were solved by intelligence, being ethical, and so on, there wouldn't need to be. Those things only ultimately help us if we are able to apply them in the face of old age, sickness and death. People can become very good at "life," achieve many things, create lots of happiness for themselves and others, but when they get ill or suffer some random accident that can somehow seem not part of the deal. It can seem unfair. So the next level of suffering is this. It is realizing that we do not have the capacity to cope with old age sickness and death. We know we are not ready. But by traversing the path of application we make ourselves ready, by developing spiritual faculties and powers. The Path of Application then consists of the fourth and fifth "sets:" developing the five spiritual faculties and the five powers.

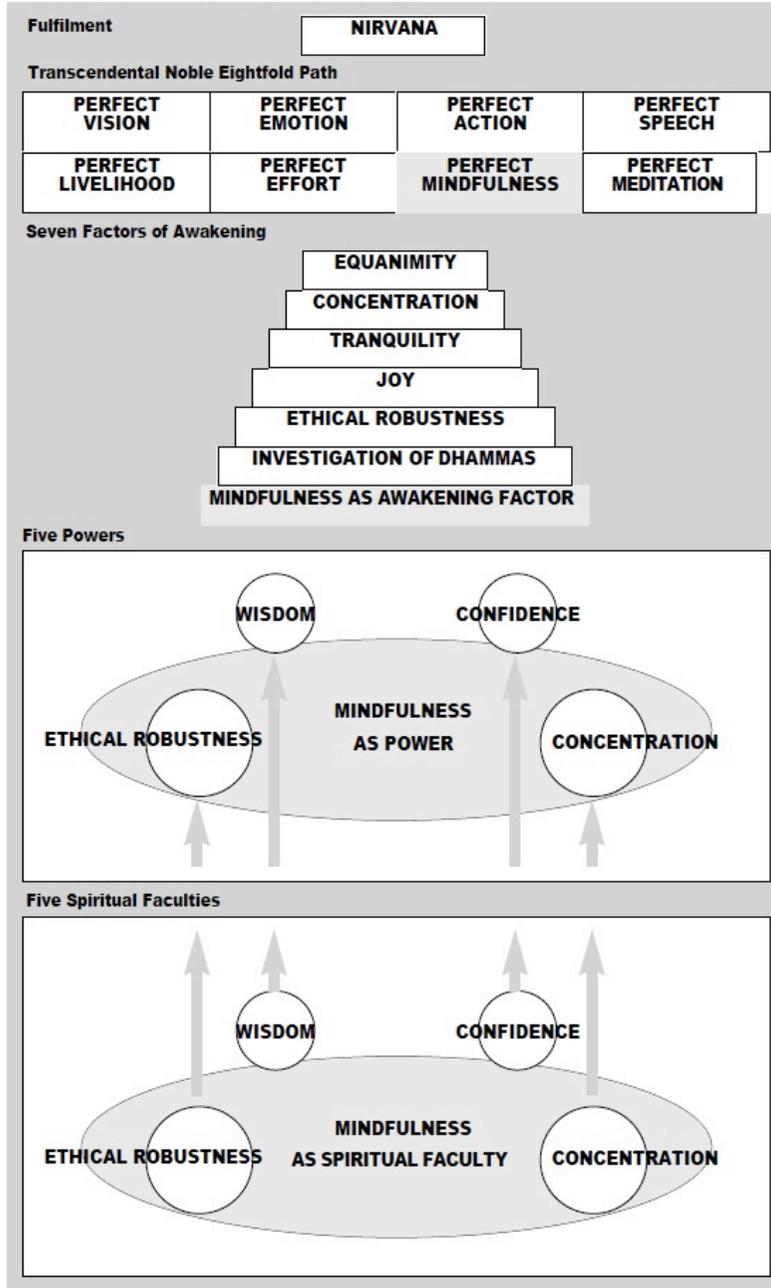
A spiritual faculty (*indriya*) we could say is a faculty that is able to continue functioning in the face of a spiritual truth. In this case the truth is that of 'old age, sickness and death.' The word *faculty* comes from the same root as the word "easy," so the five spiritual faculties make things easier in the face of death.

So it is mindfulness as a spiritual faculty (*satindriya*) that sees the situation and sees what needs to be developed. It sees that the spiritual faculties of confidence-trust (*saddhindriya*.) wisdom (*pannindriya*.) concentration (*samadhindriya*) and ethical robustness (*viriyindriya*) need to be developed. It sees also that the faculties of wisdom and confidence-trust and those of ethical robustness and concentration often get out of balance and therefore need to be brought up together.¹ It is particularly concerned to overcome any weaknesses and so develop a rounded "spiritual personality" that is robust in the face of 'old age, sickness and death.'

When these faculties are fully developed there are no more weaknesses. What we have then are the five powers (*balas*.) which are just the five spiritual faculties become unshakeable. So once the five powers are developed we have the capacity to cope with old age, sickness and death. And as the point at which a person has a sufficient level of momentum to be guaranteed the attainment of Nirvana is called "stream entry," there is some logic to equating the development of the five powers with stream entry (see Fig.2)

¹ See 'The Pattern of Buddhist Life and Work' in *What is the Dharma?*

From mindfulness as a spiritual faculty to Nirvana



The Path of Seeing

The practitioner of mindfulness, that faculty now an unshakable power, now turns it unblinkingly towards anything and everything. Power is described in physics as the ability to do work. It is as if with the advent of the five spiritual powers, a person is only then really ready to do the spiritual work, which is to see clearly into the nature of reality. The next path is therefore called the Path of Seeing and is represented in Fig.2 by the "pyramid" of qualities called the seven factors of awakening (*bojjhngas.*) Having no weaknesses, reality cannot now shake their mindfulness. So where before they may have been able to maintain mindfulness under conducive conditions, there are now no conditions under which they cannot maintain it. They can now practice awareness in the light of *the way things are.*

The path now consists of the seven factors of enlightenment, which they "climb up," beginning with mindfulness as a factor of awakening (*sati-sambojjhanga.*) They are able to be aware of any phenomena whatsoever, including the most challenging. And then they can really investigate them using the factor of awakening called investigation of *dhammas* (*dhamma-vicaya-sambojjhanga*) to see clearly what objects in their minds they are best investing their energies in. They are likely to feel dispassion for conditioned phenomena which they see cannot ultimately satisfy them, and passion towards unconditioned phenomena, such as the awakened mind itself, which they see can satisfy them. They therefore put their energies into what can ultimately satisfy them, which is the factor of awakening called ethical robustness (*viriya-sambojjhanga.*) and because they develop what is satisfying that is the factor of awakening of joy (*piti-sambojjhanga.*) and as there is no other joy outside of this joy that leads to the factor of awakening of concentration (*samadhi-sambojjhanga*) and as this concentration is firm in the face of all phenomena that leads finally to the factor of awakening of equanimity (*upekkha-sambojjhanga.*) So at the culmination of the Path of Seeing, the practitioner of mindfulness is equanimous with regard to all phenomena. The Path of Seeing addresses and resolves the suffering that is there because we know we are ready to face reality but we haven't yet faced it. At the end of the Path of Seeing we are essentially enlightened. But there is still some suffering left in the sense that though we are enlightened, there are other people that are not.

The Path of Practice

If at the beginning of a Buddhists career they try to take in the Four Noble Truths and practice the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyo-atthangiko maggo.*) Once the practitioner of mindfulness has completed the Path of Seeing, as they have now fully taken in the Four Noble Truths, they do not now have to try to practice the Noble Eightfold Path, it is simply their natural way of being. The seventh "set," therefore, is the Noble Eightfold Path at this transcendental level. Mindfulness at this stage is an effortless perfection called Perfect Mindfulness (*samma-sati*) and a person on the Path of Practice lives out the Transcendental Noble Eightfold Path, demonstrating it to others. So the suffering overcome here is that others have not yet been led to Nirvana.

The Path of Fulfilment

The fifth and final path isn't really a path at all, it just marks the achievement of Nirvana (which may include the notion of perpetual self-transcendence.)

Postscript

I presented this material at a recent order weekend and one order member raised the objection that the Five Paths seem artificially formulaic in the way that they 'stack teachings' that originally are complete paths in themselves, e.g the four foundations of mindfulness and the Noble Eightfold Path. I have been thinking about what he said since and have come up with a few thoughts. The first is that every Buddhist model or path describes the operation of Conditionality, or *paticcasamuppada*, and within that seem to be two basic patterns: one 'spatial' and one 'augmentative.' The 'spatial' dimension to conditionality is the degree to which 'sets' of conditions - rather than being arranged in linear sequences - exist, as it were, on the same 'level,' i.e. in a web, and are developed 'in parallel' rather than 'in series.' Examples are the four foundations of mindfulness, the five spiritual faculties, the five powers and the eight limbs of the Noble Eightfold Path (sets 1, 4, 5 and 7.) The Buddhist path is often expressed in this way, in terms of sets of conditions. One gradually builds up a network of conditions, in which each of the 'nodes' in the network supports the other nodes. For instance, Right Livelihood and Right View mutually support each other. The nodes in the network are 'brought up together.' The 'temporal' / augmentative dimension to conditionality is the degree to which conditions - or 'sets' / networks of conditions - are in a progressive / hierarchical sequence. Sometimes we get what looks like a linear sequence of individual factors - for instance, the seven factors of awakening or the positive nidanas of the spiral path we are familiar with in Triratna² (though we should be careful not to think that because the sequence is linear that it implies 'cause and effect:' conditionality still applies.) Sometimes we get what we might call a 'stack,' which is a combination of 'spatial' and 'temporal' / augmentative conditionality. The Five Paths is a 'stack,' as is the sequence in the *Avijja Sutta* [\[AN 10.61:\]](#)

Association with good people feeds and fulfils hearing the true teaching,
Hearing the true teaching feeds and fulfils faith,
Faith feeds and fulfils wise attention,
Wise attention feeds and fulfils mindfulness and attentiveness,
Mindfulness and attentiveness feeds and fulfils sense restraint,
Sense restraint feeds and fulfils the three good courses³
The three good courses feed and fulfil the four foundations of mindfulness,
The four foundations of mindfulness feed and fulfil the seven bodhi factors,
The seven bodhi factors feed and fulfil liberation through knowledge [Nirvana]

I think in the case of a 'stack' like the Five Paths, what we are seeing is a process whereby sometimes we need to 'broaden out' and attend to a 'spatial' set of conditions like the four foundations of mindfulness (or the mundane eightfold path,) and sometimes we need to allow a condition - or set of conditions - to 'feed and fulfil' the next factor - or set of factors - in a progressive sequence. With the 'spatial' dimension of conditionality we 'cover all the bases' of what it is important to attend to at that level, and with the 'augmentative'

dimension we allow the next step naturally to unfold: as in the simile of water flowing down the mountainside, and filling up the crevices, gullies, lakes, rivers and eventually the ocean.

So why do we have all these different versions of the path. A simple idea is that they cover the same ground in more or less detail. The four foundations are the direct path to Nirvana. The Five Paths start with the four foundations, and just fill out more details. Incidentally, Bhante has talked about the four foundations of mindfulness as 'Integration' and the four right efforts as 'Perfect Emotion'⁴ and it is not difficult to see how the higher 'sets' (the faculties, powers and Noble Eightfold Path) fit in with 'Spiritual Death' and 'Spiritual Rebirth' and 'Compassionate Activity.' Another thought is that because the path is augmentative and is about building up supportive conditions, in a way it can start with a range of factors: it can start with mindfulness (as in the Five Paths) or it can start with ethics (as in the Threefold Way,) or with faith (in a way the spiral path of the *Upanisa Sutta* starts with faith; Pinghiya's 'Way to the Beyond' starts with faith) or with association with good people (as in the *Meghiya* and *Avijja Suttas*) and then the other conditions are brought in later. The main thing is that they are all present in the end (as represented by the eight limbs of the transcendental Noble Eightfold Path.)

Roughly paraphrasing Cittapala, the evolution of the Five Paths began with the *darsana* and *bhavana margas*. These broadly correspond to the Path of Vision followed by the Path of Transformation. This essential insight 'was later elaborated by various schools who 'added three further stages to make five, two prior preparatory stages drawing attention to what is necessary to the path of vision, and a final culminating stage that drew out the implications of the fruits of the path of transformation. In the first stage, on the path of accumulation, we establish a foundation of relative integration by accumulating certain moral, intellectual, and spiritual qualities, which involves three degrees of intensity of practice. First, we find a teacher, and Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels under their guidance, listen to the Dharma (*srutamayaprajna*), and practise the four foundations of mindfulness. Secondly, we more consciously practise the four right efforts and ethics. Thirdly, we develop the psychic powers (*rdhipada*). As a result, even this first stage, the path of accumulation, can precipitate an effective link with the Transcendental, although probably not irrevocably. The path of application, primarily envisaged in terms of effective meditative practice, leads to a deeper understanding of the nature of reality with the firm establishing of the five spiritual faculties. Having mobilized all our energies, and reached the peak of mundane development, we become sufficiently open to enter the path of vision, in which we have some direct vision of the truth. This involves a radical shift in perception where "petty self-centredness with all its likes and dislikes gives way to a new self-concept which is in harmony with reality. In the light of that breakthrough, a gradual transformation of our whole being takes place. This path of transformation "is already present and coexistent with the path of vision since we cannot help acting on what we have seen." It is the path of practice inasmuch as we act on that which has been seen. Whether by way of the Eightfold path or the six *paramitas*, we attain a wider and more comprehensive realization of the Truth. The final path constitutes the continuing development of ever fuller Enlightenment. It is not a full-stop, since Enlightenment abounds in compassionate activities that are completely spontaneous, which is why perhaps Gampopa calls this the stage of Buddha activity.'

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² For other progressive (lokuttara) sequences, see two articles on Jayarava's Raves website: 'Complexity and Simplicity in Doctrine' and 'Another version of the Spiral Path.'

³ Skillful actions of body, speech and mind.

⁴ Mind in Buddhist Psychology seminar (free buddhist audio.)