The 37 Factors of Enlightenment

The 37 Factors of Enlightenment are:
1. The four applications of mindfulness
2. The four right abandonments
3. The four supports of miraculous abilities
4. The five powers
5. The five strengths
6. The seven elements of enlightenment
7. The eight elements of an Arya path (i.e., the noble eightfold path)

The Four Applications of Mindfulness

The four applications of mindfulness are:
(1) Application of mindfulness to the body
(2) Application of mindfulness to feelings
(3) Application of mindfulness to the mind
(4) Application of mindfulness to phenomena

The meaning of an application of mindfulness is: a path consciousness pertaining to the mental factor of either mindfulness or wisdom that observes a body, feeling, mind or phenomenon and examines it by way of its specific or general characteristics.

Lama Tsongkhapa says in his *Golden Rosary* that the body refers to (a) internal forms which are sense powers such as the eye sense power, the ear sense power, etc., (b) external forms which are the five sense objects, and (c) forms that are neither external nor internal, i.e. the physical sense organs such as the eye-balls, and so forth.

Feelings refer to pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings; the mind refers to the six main minds (the five sense consciousnesses and the mental consciousness), and phenomena refer to (a) all mental factors other than feeling, (b) all impermanent phenomena that are neither form nor consciousness (such as karmic imprints, a person, etc.), and (c) permanent phenomena.

Gyaltsab Je explains in his *Ornament of the Essence of the Presentation of the Abhisamayaalamkara and its Commentary*:

“To examine the specific characteristics of those four objects means to thoroughly analyze the fact that the body is impure, feelings are [in the nature of] suffering, the mind is impermanent, and phenomena are selfless.

To examine the general characteristics means to thoroughly analyze impermanence, suffering, being empty, selflessness, and the lack of true existence.

The four types of application of mindfulness thoroughly analyze those characteristics with wisdom and focus on them again and again with mindfulness.

The purpose of such analysis is to cause us to engage in meditation on the four noble truths once we have understood the four truths.

When applying mindfulness to the body, we engage in meditation on true suffering since we come to understand that the body is in the nature of pervasive conditioned suffering and thus generate the wish to be free from the body.
Through applying mindfulness to feelings, we engage in meditation on the *true origin* because we come to see that feelings give rise to craving and hence generate the wish to eliminate craving.

When applying mindfulness to the mind, we engage in meditation on *true cessation* since we come to realize that, being without a self, the mind is generated and ceases in each moment. Thereby, we will lose our fear of the absence of a self and generate the wish to actualize [true] cessations.

When applying mindfulness to phenomena, we engage in meditation on the *true path* because we come to realize that thoroughly afflicted phenomena (i.e., *true sufferings* and *true origins*) are to be abandoned, whereas completely pure phenomena (i.e., *true cessations* and *true paths*) are to be relied upon. Thus, we will generate the wish to meditate [on true paths].

The reason for observing the body first is that childish beings think: the body is an entity that serves as the abode of the self; feelings are enjoyed by the self; the mind is an entity that is the self; and phenomena are the basis of a thoroughly afflicted self and a completely pure self.

From the small path of accumulation onwards, Bodhisattvas meditate on the four applications of mindfulness. When these four are brought to completion they become an aspect of the omniscient mind of a Buddha.

Therefore, there are many purposes for positing the applications of mindfulness here: the main purpose is (a) to understand that the 37 Factors of Enlightenment arise in the continuum of Bodhisattvas; (b) to understand that if the different classes of spiritual realizations are divided with regard to the person on which they are based, the 37 Factors of Enlightenment belong in the class of Hearer realizations; (c) to understand that Bodhisattvas meditate on the 37 Factors that are concordant with the 37 Factors of Hearers and that upon completion of that meditation the 37 Factors become the omniscient mind of a Buddha; and (d) to realize thereby that an omniscient mind has aspects that are similar to those of Hearers.”

**The Four Right Abandonments**

The *four right abandonments* are:

1. Right abandonment that abandons a non-virtue that has arisen
2. Right abandonment that does not give rise to a non-virtue that has not yet arisen
3. Right abandonment that increases a virtue that has arisen
4. Right abandonment that gives rise to a virtue that has not yet arisen

The meaning of a *correct abandonment* is: a path consciousness which is the mental factor of effort taking delight in averting what is to be abandoned and in adopting what is an antidote.

Gyaltsab Je explains in his *Ornament of the Essence of the Presentation*:

“The explanation of the *applications of mindfulness*, is followed by an explanation of the paths that have arisen from effort – the *four right abandonments*. The reason for presenting these [eight factors] in this particular order is that now one needs to give rise to [a type of] effort that takes delight in averting what is to be abandoned and in
adopting what is an antidote so that one can start to engage in averting and adopting with regard to the four noble truths.

There are four kinds of right abandonment, which are [the types of] effort that are the cause of: (1) rightly abandoning a thoroughly afflicted non-virtue that has arisen, (2) not giving rise to [a thoroughly afflicted non-virtue] that has not yet arisen, (3) increasing a completely pure virtue that has arisen, and (4) giving rise to a completely pure virtue that has not yet arisen.

In the sutra it is said that in order to (1) abandon non-virtuous phenomena that have arisen, (2) not give rise to [non-virtuous phenomena] that have not yet arisen, (3) increase virtuous phenomena that have arisen, and (4) give rise to [virtuous phenomena] that have not yet arisen, one should cultivate aspiration, endeavor, making efforts, correct perception by the mind, and firmly settling of the mind.

Aspiration is the foundation of effort (since it precedes effort). Endeavor refers to effort that mentally takes up the attributes of calm abiding, correct perception, and equanimity.

Making efforts refers to generating the antidotes to laxity and excitement: the direct antidotes [to laxity and excitement] are correct perception by the mind and settling the mind. When laxity arises in the mind, one should generate correct perception of the qualities of the Buddha, thinking about which gives rise to a pure faith that elevates the mind. When excitement arises, one should think about the disadvantages of cyclic existence; this produces a sense of weariness that enables one to gather the scattered mind back inside and settle it on a focal object.

Right abandonment is presented [here] as arising on the middling path of accumulation. This is in order to lead to the understanding that on that level right abandonment attains a special strength and [that the right abandonment presented here] is the result of meditating on the application of mindfulness. However, a fully qualified right abandonment arises also on the small path of accumulation.”

The Four Supports of Miraculous Abilities

The four supports of miraculous abilities are:

1. A support of miraculous abilities that is aspiration
2. A support of miraculous abilities that is effort
3. A support of miraculous abilities that is reflection
4. A support of miraculous abilities that is analysis

The meaning of a support of miraculous abilities is: a path consciousness that is the mental factor of concentration endowed with the eight formatives abandoning the five faults.

The eight formatives are:
1. Aspiration
2. Exertion
3. Faith
4. Pliancy
5. Mindfulness
6. Introspection
7. Reflection
8. Equanimity
The five faults are:
1) Laziness
2) Forgetting the instructions
3) Laxity and excitement
4) Non-application of antidotes when they are needed
5) Application of antidotes when they are not needed

Gyaltsab Je explains in his *Ornament of the Essence of the Presentation*:

Next comes the paths that completely devote themselves to concentration – the four *supports of miraculous abilities*. The reason for explaining them after the four *right abandonments* is that once one possesses effort taking delight in averting what is to be abandoned and in adopting what is an antidote, one needs to make the mind serviceable through concentration.

*Supports of miraculous abilities* are of four types: they refer to a concentration that is endowed with the eight formatives eliminating the five faults and that (1) connects one-pointedly with the object of meditation in dependence on aspirational concentration; (2) connects one-pointedly with the object of meditation in dependence on effort; (3) connects one-pointedly with the object of meditation in dependence on reflective concentration acquired at birth from having meditated on concentration in a previous [life]; or that (4) connects one-pointedly with the object of meditation in dependence on analytical concentration that meticulously discerns the Dharma taught by concentration.

The eight formatives abandoning [the five faults] are: aspiration, exertion, faith, pliancy, mindfulness, introspection, reflection, and equanimity.

Among the five faults the first one is (1) laziness that impedes meditation. The direct antidote removing laziness is exertion. The foundation of exertion is aspiration. The cause of exertion is faith. The result of exertion is pliancy.

[Another] fault is (2) forgetting the instructions when meditating on concentration. Its antidote is mindfulness.

(3) Laxity and excitement are faults when one engages in the actual practice. Although mindfulness is their main antidote, one needs an introspection that checks [whether] laxity or excitement [are present].

If laxity or excitement have arisen, it is a fault (4) not to apply an antidote. The antidote to [not applying an antidote] is reflection.

It is also a fault (5) to apply antidotes when concentration is operating naturally without any need for exertion. The antidote [to such an unnecessary application] is equanimity free from exertion.

Since the [four types of] concentration are the main basis for cultivating miraculous abilities, they are called *supports of miraculous abilities*.

In order to understand that the three [groups] of paths (i.e., the *applications of mindfulness*, the *right abandonments*, and the *supports of miraculous abilities*) enhance one another, the supports of miraculous abilities are presented as arising on the great path of accumulation. However, we should understand that they also arise on the small path of accumulation.”
The Five Powers

The five powers are:

1. The power that is faith
2. The power that is effort
3. The power that is mindfulness
4. The power that is concentration
5. The power that is wisdom

The definition of a power that is part of the 37 Factors of Enlightenment is: a path consciousness consisting of any of the five mental factors of faith and so forth that independently cultivates an Arya path and is attained from the heat level of the path of preparation onward.

Gyaltsab Je explains in his *Ornament of the Essence of the Presentation*:

The explanation of the supports of miraculous abilities is followed by an explanation of the paths that prepare [the mind] for a clear realization of the truth – the five powers. The reason for presenting them in this sequence is that the heat and peak levels of the path of preparation, which control the clear realization of the truth, arise after having thoroughly trained the mind in concentration.

Regarding the subject, a power that has the nature of the heat and peak levels [of the path of preparation], it is fivefold, because it consists of a power that is (1) faith that believes in the truth, (2) effort that delights in averting what is to be averted and in adopting what is to be adopted, (3) mindfulness that does not forget the observed objects and their aspects, (4) concentration single-pointedly focused [on its object], and (5) wisdom that discerns the mode of existence of phenomena.”

The five strengths

The five strengths are:

1. The strength that is faith
2. The strength that is effort
3. The strength that is mindfulness
4. The strength that is concentration
5. The strength that is wisdom

The meaning of a strength that is part of the 37 Factors of Enlightenment is: a path consciousness pertaining to any of the five mental factors of faith and so forth that cannot be suppressed by its opposing factors and is attained from the forbearance level of the path of preparation onward.

Gyaltsab Je explains in his *Ornament of the Essence of the Presentation*:

The explanation of the five powers is followed by an explanation of the paths associated with the clear realizations – the five strengths. The reason for presenting them in this sequence is that the levels of forbearance and supreme Dharma that are in the nature of the strengths arise [after] one has attained the heat level etc. that is in the nature of the powers. This is because [after one has attained the heat and peak

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1 The opposing factors are: non-faith, laziness, forgetfulness, distraction, and distorted discernment.
levels, the five mental factors of faith and so forth that are in the nature of the levels of forbearance and supreme Dharma arise.

The five strengths are: (1) faith that believes in the truth, (2) effort [that exerts itself] to quickly realize the truth, (3) mindfulness that does not forget the observed objects and their aspects, (4) concentration single-pointedly focused [on its object], and (5) wisdom that discerns the mode of existence of phenomena.

These five strengths are [like] a master that controls the clear realization of the truth. The difference between them and the previous [powers] is that while one is meditating [on the five strengths] one undermines the manifestation of non-faith, laziness, forgetfulness, distraction, and distorted discernment. Therefore, even during the subsequent time, when one is no longer meditating on faith and so forth, non-faith etc. will hardly ever arise.

On the heat and peak level, when the five powers are active, their opposing factors do not arise either, but they manifest during the subsequent time.

The seven elements of enlightenment

The seven elements of enlightenment are:

1. The element of enlightenment that is mindfulness
2. The element of enlightenment that is discernment of phenomena
3. The element of enlightenment that is effort
4. The element of enlightenment that is joy
5. The element of enlightenment that is pliancy
6. The element of enlightenment that is concentration
7. The element of enlightenment that is equanimity

The meaning of an element of enlightenment is: a path consciousness, in the continuum of an Arya, that is the cause of its result, enlightenment.

Gyaltsab Je explains in his Ornament of the Essence of the Presentation:

The explanation of the powers and strengths is followed by an explanation of the paths that are a clear realization of the truth – the seven elements of enlightenment. The reason for this sequence is that the paths that directly see the truth and are in the nature of the elements of enlightenment arise after realizing and attaining [the paths of] the heat level etc. that are in the nature of the powers and the strengths.

The seven elements of enlightenment are: (1) mindfulness that is an abiding element observing the truth without distraction, (2) discernment of phenomena that is an element of nature newly and directly realizing selflessness, (3) effort that is an element of definite release, (4) joy that is a beneficial element benefitting body and mind, (5) pliancy that is an element of a basis free from afflictions, (6) concentration that is an abiding element that is free from afflictions, (7) equanimity that is an element of an entity that is free from afflictions.

With the element of enlightenment that is right mindfulness one observes (a) [true] sufferings, after which one seeks to be free from them and remains in this [state] mindfully without forgetfulness; (b) [true] origins, after which one seeks to be without desirous attachment and to remain thus; (c) [true] cessations, after which

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2 Mindfulness is an abiding element in the sense that it remains focused on its object without distraction.
one seeks to actualize them and remain thus; and (d) [true] paths that remove suffering, after which one seeks to meditate on those paths and remains thus mindfully without forgetfulness. We should understand that this is also the way to meditate on the remaining [elements of enlightenment].

Thereby one observes the four noble truths by means of the elements of enlightenment, which is why we should understand that these seven factors are causes accomplishing the respective enlightenment of beings who are endowed with the Hearer lineage and so forth. Yet here [in the context of the fourth chapter of the Abhisamayaalamkara] they are mainly meditated on by Bodhisattvas."

**The Eight Elements of an Arya Path**

The *eight elements of an Arya path* (i.e. the noble eightfold path) are:

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right exertion
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

The meaning of an *element of an Arya path* is: a path in the continuum of an Arya being, which is a cause of its resultant Arya path.

Gyaltsab Je explains in his *Ornament of the Essence of the Presentation*:

The explanation of the *elements of enlightenment* is followed by an explanation of the pure means to definite deliverance – the *eight elements of an Arya path*. The reason [for this sequence is] that a path of meditation arises after having directly and newly realized the truth.

The *eight elements of an Arya path* are: (1) right view, that during the period of subsequent attainment, thoroughly analyses the suchness that was [previously] realized by a meditative equipoise, (2) right intention, that motivates speech which teaches what one has realized to others, (3) pure speech that is [a path facilitating] a verbal action which teaches what one has realized to others, (4) right action that is [a path facilitating] a pure physical action such as giving up killing, and so forth, (5) right livelihood that is [a path facilitating] pure physical and verbal actions such as giving up hypocrisy, flattery, and so forth, (6) right exertion that exerts itself in [cultivating] the antidotes which abandon the objects of abandonment on the path of meditation, (7) right mindfulness that does not forget the attributes of calm abiding, right perception, and equanimity, and (8) right concentration that meditates in order to accomplish special qualities such as clairvoyance and so forth.

The *eight elements of an Arya path* can be condensed into: (1) the element that thoroughly analyses, (2) the element that creates understanding, (3) the element that creates belief, and (4) the element that is an antidote to opposing factors. It can also be condensed into (a) the training in ethics, (b) the training in concentration, and (c) the training in wisdom.