

The Origin and Development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the origin and development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhāna*) within the Chinese Buddhist tradition. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness—mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind, and mental objects—constitute a central practice in Theravāda Buddhism, introduced through the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. The integration and evolution of these practices within Chinese Buddhism, particularly through the influences of Mahāyāna and Chan (Zen) traditions, present a unique confluence of doctrinal and practical transformations. This study traces the historical journey of these foundations from their introduction into China during the Han Dynasty through the Silk Road to their adaptation and re-interpretation by Chinese Buddhist scholars and practitioners during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties (A.D. 220 – 589). By examining primary sources, commentarial literature, and contemporary practices, this article elucidates the dynamic processes that have shaped the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in the Chinese context, highlighting their enduring significance in promoting mental clarity, ethical conduct, and spiritual awakening. The discussion is framed around three key issues: 1) The Background of the Politics and Culture of the Period of Wei Jin in China; 2) The Origin and Development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China; and 3) Translation of the Scriptures about Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Early China.

Keywords: Early Buddhism; Early China; Four Foundations; Mindfulness

Introduction

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, or *Satipatṭhāna*, form a cornerstone of Buddhist meditative practice, emphasizing the cultivation of mindfulness (*sati*) through focused attention on the body (*kāyānupassanā*), feelings (*vedanānupassanā*), mind (*cittānupassanā*), and mental objects (*dhammānupassanā*). Originating from the Pāli Canon, these practices are pivotal in the Theravāda tradition, serving as pathways to insight (*vipassanā*) and liberation (*nibbāna*). The transmission of these foundational practices to China marked a significant moment in the cross-cultural exchange of Buddhist doctrines and methodologies.

The introduction of Buddhism into China occurred earlier than often recognized, but it was during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties (220–589 CE)—a period of significant political fragmentation and cultural development—that the Four Foundations of Mindfulness began to take root. This era, encompassing the Three Kingdoms (Cao Wei, Shu Han, and Dong Wu), Western Jin, Eastern Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, was marked by frequent regime changes, continuous wars, and a long period of feudal separations. Despite the turmoil, this period saw the rise of metaphysics (*Xuanxue* 玄學), the flourishing of Taoism, and the introduction of Persian and Greek cultural elements through translated novels.

Chinese culture during this time was notably impacted by the import of Buddhism, which began to flourish and integrate with native traditions. Early translations of Buddhist texts, including those pertaining to mindfulness, were crucial in this process. Over the centuries, Chinese Buddhist scholars and practitioners reinterpreted the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, aligning them with indigenous philosophical frameworks such as Daoism and Confucianism. This syncretic approach allowed for the development of unique Chinese Buddhist practices that retained the essence of mindfulness while resonating with the cultural and spiritual milieu of China.

This article aims to explore the historical trajectory and development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China. It examines three key issues: 1) The Background of the Politics and Culture of the Period of Wei Jin in China; 2) The Origin and Development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China; and 3) Translation of the Scriptures about Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Early China. By understanding the origin and evolution of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China, we gain insights into the broader processes of Buddhist adaptation and transformation across cultures.

1). Ming Jiao and Xuan Xue become the main background of culture in this period

Early Chinese Buddhism is a system *sui generis*, the result of an independent development which can only be studied and understood in connection with the cultural environment in which this development took place and against the background of the Chinese world-view prevailing at the period in question¹. In the last decades of the third century, in the realm of thought, Xuan xue(玄學) reigned supreme; with Xiang Xiu (向秀) and Guo Xiang (郭象), who were active during this period, it had entered its last creative phase. In gentry circles, there was a most vivid interest in philosophical and metaphysical problems and discussions. Just as second century Daoists discovered in the Buddhist practices of trance and meditation a new and more effective road to immortality, so some late third-century literati found in the foreign doctrine of the Void a new yet strangely familiar way of thought. Needless to say, that their interpretation of the doctrine was colored and distorted by their own cultural background, by the one-sided selection of topics, by the very language in which it was presented to them. Mahayana concepts like Gnosis (prajñā, 智), the Void (śūnyatā, 空, 明), Stillness (sānti, 寂) and Expediency (upāya, 方便) naturally and imperceptibly merged into their xuanxue counterparts of Saintliness (聖), Emptiness (虛) and Non-being (無), Tranquility (靜) and Non-activity (無為), Spontaneity (自然) and Stimulus-and-response (感應). To the cultured classes, the Mahayana and most of all the Prajñāpāramitā doctrine must have appealed just because of this seeming familiarity: because it handled what seemed to be the same fundamental concepts, at the same time, however, placing these ideas in a new perspective, giving them another and deeper significance, and surrounding them with the halo of a supramundane revelation².

Mingjiao(名教)and Xuan xue(玄學). Two trends of thought play a dominating role in the intellectual life of the cultured classes in medieval China. One of these is closely related to the practical problems of government and stresses the primary importance of social duties, ritual, law, and characterology (the latter as a means to define the capacities of individuals so as to realize an effective distribution of functions to be “allotted” 分 to them, and thus to harmonize “name”, ming 名, and “reality”, shi 實). This mixture of Confucian and Legalist notions and precepts is therefore generally called Ming jiao, “the

¹ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 1.

² E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 73.

doctrine of Names". It represents the more conservative and realistic tendency in medieval Chinese philosophy. The other trend of thought is characterized by a profound interest in ontological problems: the quest for a permanent substrate underlying the world of change, starting from the assertion that all temporally or spatially limited phenomena, anything "nameable", all movement, change, and diversity, in short, all "being", is produced, manifested and sustained by a basic principle which is unlimited, unnameable, unmoving, unchanging and undiversified, and which therefore can be qualified as "non-being". The basic problem is the relation between this "fundamental non-being" (benwu 本無) and "final being" (moyou 未有), a relation which is described as that of "substance" (ti 體) and function (yong 用). This implies that "being" and "non-being", though different, do not form a pair of mutually exclusive opposites. In the words of the Dao de jing, which is one of the basic scriptures of this school, "they emerge together, but have different names", and this unity is "the Mystery of Mysteries, the gate of all wonders". Hence these speculations are usually called Xuan xue (玄學), "the Study of the Mystery" or "Dark Learning". It represents the more abstract, unworldly, and idealistic tendency in medieval Chinese thought³. This fusion of Yi Jing speculations and some (drastically reinterpreted) elements from Daoist philosophy is characteristic of Xuan xue; "you" and "wu" became the most basic terms in these theories⁴. Zhuangzi had always been the great prophet of their ideals of untrammelled freedom, anarchy, and ecstasy. The "wuwei" means to live in strict accordance with one's individual nature, smoothly and "automatically", without striving to break through the barriers of one's proper "allotment"⁵. Since the Causal retribution is the main theoretical content of Buddhism. For the early Chinese Buddhists, the cosmic justice of karma remained a "natural" or "spontaneous retribution" 自然之服, a term which we find already used—in a somewhat different sense—in the Zhuangzi commentary⁶.

When Buddhism in the late third and early fourth century began to penetrate the life and thought of the cultured upper classes, it was especially the doctrine of universal "Emptiness" as expounded in the basic scriptures of this school of Mahayana Bore (Prajñāpāramitā sutra, Vimalakīrtinirdeśa 《維摩詰所說經》) that became popular in gentry circles, mainly on account of its apparent affinity with the prevailing Xuan xue speculations. The "dhyāna"-trend initiated

³ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 87.

⁴ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 89.

⁵ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 91.

⁶ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 92.

by An Shigao and his school remained important all through the history of early Chinese Buddhism, but its sphere of influence was as a matter of course more restricted to the monastic community⁷. Mingjiao and Xuan xue gradually developed into future Qing tan.

At the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century, the nobles took the initiative to explore human nature due to the development of culture. This awareness of human nature is, on the one hand, the popularity of Qing tan, and thus the tendency in Lao-Zhuang or simply sing seclusion, some aristocrats are free from the shackles of Confucianism. They love the nature of mountains and rivers and

wander in the world of literature and poetry⁸.....The term “Pure Conversation”, Qing tan 清談, denotes a special type of rhetorical discussion about philosophical and other subjects which was much vogue among the cultured upper classes since the third century A.D. At the beginning of the fourth century, Qing tan meetings had already become a refined and very exclusive pass-time of the highest gentry⁹. Monks and the highest gentry came into contact, and the sudden influence of Buddhism was evident in many areas. Monks joined in the "Qing tan" as missionaries, state teachers, counsellors, and friends to visit the imperial palace and grand estates. The practice of Qing tan was one of the most important factors in the spread of Buddhism in the circles of the highest gentry.

2). The understanding of Chan by the Chinese monks at that time represented by Huiyuan

Huiyuan was also interested in dhyāna disciplines other than the rudimentary, “popularized” techniques connected with the cult of Amitābha and the commemoration of the Buddha. When he sent some of his disciples to the West in search of scriptures, he did so, according to his biography, because of the incompleteness of the extant dhyāna and Vinaya texts, and in one of his prefaces, he himself complains of the scarcity of dhyāna scriptures and expresses his joy at the translations made by Kumārajīva in this field. The study of the strictly monastic dhyāna of the Small Vehicle at Mt. Lu was no doubt much stimulated by the arrival of Buddha-bhadra nearby A.D. 410. Like most of the foreign missionaries of the late fourth and early fifth century, Buddha-bhadra belonged to the Sarvāstivādin school(說一切有部)which flourished at his native Kashmir and

⁷ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 35-36.

⁸ 鎌田茂雄 中國佛教通史 *The Buddhist history of China*, volume 1, (關世謙 等譯 台灣: 佛光書局 2010年, 2nd), 103.

⁹ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 93.

in various Serindian centers. It is difficult to say in how far the dhyāna discipline revealed by Buddha-bhadra was understood and accepted by Huiyuan and his followers. In any case, as we said above, it was a strictly clerical affair, a system of yoga intended to be practiced by the adept in the seclusion of the monastery and completely beyond the reach of the laymen who stayed "within the family". Despite of their great interest from a doctrinal point of view, these techniques and the scriptures dealing with them are of much less importance for our present subject than the devotional beliefs and practices mentioned above, which by their very concreteness and simplicity could become an integral part of medieval gentry culture¹⁰.

3). During this period, the Chinese people's understanding of Buddhism

Generally speaking, Chinese people are realistic and have a strong desire to pursue realistic interests in religion. In the mentality of the general public, they will not worship without realistic interests. The biggest reason why Buddhism is accepted by the Chinese people is secular interests. In the early stage of China's acceptance of Buddhism, its belief content was the secular interests begging for blessings. Subsequently became Chinese consistent attitude on doctrines, also shows the basic character, the Chinese Buddhist concepts of Buddhism, although in a variety of teaching system has the profound awareness, it is a theological Buddha, his presence there is no relation with the general population, the level of folk beliefs, Buddha, the bodhisattva is a super ability of people to the secular interests and to worship, with high Chinese Buddhist various deepen the theory on the existence of the teachings of the Buddha's concept has little correlation¹¹.

4). The emergence of Ge Yi Buddhism

Buddhism is also a kind of culture, and it must maintain its owner nature and property that the Buddhism was introduced into China as a culture, the heterogeneous nature of the doctrine as introduced into China was of course coupled with all but complete ignorance about the cultural milieu in which the scriptures had originated. One of the most serious problems was linguistic property¹². Geyi is a method of comparison, a philosophical concept. "Ge" means "compare" or "measure", and "yi" means "name", "project" or "concept". As the name suggests, it is to use comparison and analogy to explain and understand the concept of cross-cultural background. "Took the numerical categories (事數) of

¹⁰ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 223.

¹¹ 鐣田茂雄 中國佛教通史 *The Buddhist history of China*, volume 1, (關世謙 等譯 台灣: 佛光書局 2010年, 2nd), 3-4.

¹² E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 2.

the sutras and matched these with (terms from) secular literature, as a method to make them understand; this was called Geyi (格義)¹³. In the translation process of the scriptures, to make the Han people understand the meaning, Confucian and Taoist terms are also quoted, which is bound to accelerate the localization process of Buddhism. Thus, the doctrine was only accessible to the Chinese clergy through the distorting medium of free, lacunose, and often hardly understandable translations, the misleading effect of which was enhanced by the use of Chinese terms which already had a definite philosophical value and which consequently possessed a wide range of non-Buddhist associations¹⁴.

Being introduced to another cultural ideology as a kind of culture, in order to gain recognition, it is inevitable that there will be some struggles. It is in the course of this struggle for recognition that this form of early Chinese Buddhism—the creed of the Buddhist intelligentsia—acquired its characteristic form. Chinese Buddhism forms an extreme example of the general phenomenon that new religions, especially if they are of foreign origin, are never accepted as a new creed, completely replacing the old belief: it was superimposed upon and amalgamated with the main currents of contemporary Chinese thought, i.e., Confucianism and the gnostic and ontological speculations known as Xuan xue(玄學), to the Chinese (and, most wrongly, as “Neo-Daoism” to Western scholars). As we have said above, this applies to the cultured clergy as well as to the high-class laymen. On the other hand, the opposition against Buddhism among the Chinese intelligentsia prompted the defenders and propagators of the faith to devise apologetic arguments tending to reconcile the Buddhist doctrine with traditional Chinese thought, thus intensifying and stimulating the process of amalgamation¹⁵. Although religious movements are non-secular, they cannot be studied as a pure “history of thought”..... However, unworldly can be studied as a “history of ideas” pure and simple. It follows logically from the nature of Buddhism itself. Buddhism is not and has never pretended to be a “theory”, an explanation of the universe; it is a way to salvation, a way of life. Its introduction into China means not only the propagation of certain religious notions but also the introduction of a new form of social organization: the monastic community, the sangha¹⁶.

¹³ 釋慧皎“高僧傳”新脩大正藏 冊50, 卷4, No.2059, (中華台北, Chinese Buddhist Text Electronic Association, 2018),347 .

¹⁴ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 2.

¹⁵ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 3-4.

¹⁶ E. Zürcher, *The Buddhism Conquest of China*, (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden: Hotei Publishing IDC Publishers, 2007), 1.

2. The Origin and Development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

In this subject, two issues will be shown, namely: 1. The Thoughts of the Direct Path of Early Buddhism; 2. Early Chinese Thoughts on Health Preservation (respiration and pranayama); 3. Introduction and Development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The details as follows.

1) The Thoughts of the Direct Path of Early Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism gradually flourished 400-500 years after the Buddha passed away. Most of the thoughts and practice methods of Mahayana in Chinese Buddhism originated from early Buddhism. In both the existing Pāli Canon and early Buddhist scriptures of Chinese Canon, the Buddha taught the monks to learn the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and pointed out that the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is the only correct way to get out of the sea of suffering, break sorrow and attain Nirvana. In Pāli Canon, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness was called “Ekāyano-maggo”, and it was called as “the direct path” or “the exclusive path” in Mahayana Canon, Chinese language speaks “Yi sheng dao”. “Yi sheng dao” has the following meanings in Chinese language: The first, “the direct path”, means that after walking this road, you can directly achieve the purpose of become a Buddhahood, because it has no crossroads and will not take us to other destinations; the second, “the path of walking alone”, means that we can only walk on this road by ourselves, there is no one to accompany us. After all, wisdom and concentration cannot be shared, such as people who drink water can know that it is warm or cold only by himself; the third, “the path of the Buddha”, means that this road was discovered by the Buddha and guided by the Buddha for us; the fourth, “the only way to Nirvana”, there is no other way to go, only this way is to Nirvana. As these meaning, Theravada Buddhism only use the phrase of “the direct path” to refer the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, it is an exclusive term for Four Foundations of Mindfulness. but it is not same in the early scriptures of Chinese Canon, for example, in the volume 20th, sutta No. 550 of Samyu- ktagama, the phrase of “Yi sheng dao” was also used to explain the “six Dhamma”. And because the phrase of “Yi sheng dao” has the meaning of “the direct path” or “the exclusive path”, and the ultimate goal of the Mahayana practitioner is to become a Buddhahood, all the principles which can guide the practice of beings to become a Buddhahood can be called “Buddha vehicle”, this is the only principle to direct beings to the goal of Buddhahood. So, later, in Tian tai school and Hua yan school use the phrase of “yi sheng dao” to refer “Buddha vehicle”.

Some words from the Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta of Dīghanikāya wrote as follows:

“There is, monks, this is one way to the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the disappearance of pain and sadness, for the gaining of the right path, for the realization of Nibbāna: - that is to say the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.”¹⁷

And these similar words will be found in *Madhyamāgama*-mindfulness sutra and volume 24th of *Samyuktāgama*, as these words, we can trust that the Mahayana Four Foundations of Mindfulness is really originated from early Buddhism.

2)Early Chinese Thoughts on Health Preservation (respiration and pranayama)

To calm the body and mind by counting breaths, so as to achieve the purpose of communicating with nature, has begun to appear in ancient China. In traditional Chinese thinking, pranayama, also known as spitting in Chinese, is often used to seek immortality and health. “Huang di nei jing -Shang tian zhen lun”, “Calm and empty, the true spirit will follow”, “breathe the spirit, and keep the mind independently”. “Zhuang zi • ke yi”, “Blow and breathe, exhale old and absorb the new”. In *Dao de jing*, many points are consistent with the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, namely, “It is the rule of the sage that without desires and keep the mind in harmony”¹⁸. “Heaven and earth can be long and long because it will be no birth, even it can live forever.”¹⁹ “No desires, the world will be peace.”²⁰ These all fall under the category of the mindfulness of dhamma; “whatever, I have a great trouble, because I have a body, if I have no body, what trouble do I have?”²¹ This belongs to the category of the mindfulness of the body. Besides, the original intention of practicing the four foundations of mindfulness is to make the inner calm, while the volume of 26th chapter of *Dao de jing*: “the heavy is the root for light, while the quietness is the king of mania”²². From this, we can conclude that before Buddhism was introduced into China, there had been a profound understanding of logarithmic and pranayama in Chinese native culture, or other words, there had been a complete practice system of its own, while the introduction of the four Places of Mindfulness can only be said to further improve this system.

¹⁷ Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of Buddha* (USA Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 350; 瞿曇僧伽提婆譯“中阿含經”, 新脩大正藏冊1, 卷24, No. 0026, (中華台北, Chinese Buddhist Text Electronic Association, 2018), 582; 求那跋陀羅譯“雜阿含經”新脩大正藏冊2, 卷24, 經607, No. 0099, (中華台北, Chinese Buddhist Text Electronic Association, 2018), 171.

¹⁸ 李聃 *道德經*(北京 中國文聯出版社 2016.10), 4.

¹⁹ 李聃 *道德經*(北京 中國文聯出版社 2016.10), 24.

²⁰ 李聃 *道德經*(北京 中國文聯出版社 2016.10), 149.

²¹ 李聃 *道德經*(北京 中國文聯出版社 2016.10), 120.

²² 李聃 *道德經*(北京 中國文聯出版社 2016.10), 106.

3).Introduction and Development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

To have an in-depth and detailed study of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, we have to divide the development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness into several stages. Researcher according to the existing data, simply divided the development of Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China into three phases, early period (from Buddhism was just introduced into China-405A.D.), middle period (405-845), and late period(854-later). in 405A.D., the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-śāstra* was translated out by Kumāra-jiva²³, from now on for the Mahayana four foundations of mindfulness provides the theoretical basis, then, the development of Four Foundations of Mindfulness gets into middle period, so, make this time as the point of early period and middle period. In the early period of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, owing to the lack of related scriptures about the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the theory of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness was based on southern Theravada scriptures, it mainly taught by monks internal, a few laypeople who favor practicing the four foundations of mindfulness have to come and practice with the monks in the temple. In the middle period (A.D.405-845), A.D.845 was the time of Hui chang Calamity. After the Hui chang Calamity, the various sects of Chinese Buddhism were sluggish, and only the Chan sect has thrived, so this was the boundary point after Hui chang Calamity is the later period. In the middle period, Under the guidance of Mahayana teachings such as *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-śāstra* and *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, some masters who teach the four foundations of mindfulness appeared. Among them, there are two most famous masters, one is Shi Sengchou and the other is Shi Zhiyi. It is a pity that the texts and scribbles related to the four foundations of mindfulness of Shi Sengchou's practice have been lost. We can only glean one or two from the "Xu gao seng zhuan" and the "Dun huang yi shu"²⁴. The four volumes of "Four Foundations of Mindfulness" by Shi Zhiyi are preserved in "Da zheng zang" book No. 46th, these will be detailed in future chapters. Since Chan sect adheres to the tenet of "a special transmission, outside the scriptures, with no dependence on words and letters. It is a direct pointing at the human mind; seeing into one's own nature and the attainment of Buddhahood²⁵", and hold on the principle of "if the delusional mind

²³ 鐸田茂雄 中國佛教通史 *The Buddhist history of China*, volume 1, (關世謙 等譯 台灣: 佛光書局 2010年, 2nd), 312.

²⁴ The "Dun huang yi shu" Manuscripts are the general term for a group of books found in Cave 17 of Mogao Grottoes in 1900. There are about 60,000 volumes in total, among which Buddhist scriptures account for 90%. They are currently scattered all over the world.

²⁵ Jing Hui, *The Gate of Chan Buddhism*, Tr. by Lin Ronghui, (Bei jing: sheng huo Chan wen hua ji jin hui, 2019), 5.

will never appear, the true mind is present”, it gradually relaxes its emphasis on four foundations of mindfulness until at the end of the last century, the advocacy of the Master Miaojing and the impact of Southern Theravada Buddhism on Chinese Buddhism, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness gradually attracted the attention of the Chinese Buddhist community. In the following discussion, the researcher mainly discusses the four foundations of mindfulness, based on these three periods.

The four foundations of mindfulness refer to the four places where the mind is settled, to observe the body is impure; to observe the feeling is suffering, to observe the mind is impermanent, and to observe the Dhamma is egolessness. The gist of Four Foundations of Mindfulness is to observe truthfully. What is “truthful” is to “recognize according to its actual appearance”. This is not recognized through pre-determined conclusions or stays on abstract conceptual formulas. What is the difference? Faithful contemplation is close to the present moment of the concrete body, feeling, mind, and Dharma. It does not require pure experience through any explanation. Only in this way can we see the truth now and truly let go of our inner clinging. Effectively relieve distress and anxiety. Don’t cling to “truth”, regenerate delusional objectives, get rid of “self-righteousness” is the key, and treat things with an open mind! As a “name of the number”, Four Foundations of Mindfulness first appeared in the “Fo shuo da an ban shou yi jing”, but it was translated as “Si Yi Zhi” at that time. “mean remember the old, death, sick, are for the body. Urticant and pain are not good feelings, remind and sensation are for the mind, action of last to get the effect, it is the Dhamma”²⁶. As these words, we should know that the “Si Yi Zhi” is Four Foundations of Mindfulness indeed. It also was pointed out that Four Foundations of Mindfulness can’t be practiced alone in this sutra, must be practiced with some vipassana together. “If the mind of a person is constantly thinking of suffering, emptiness, egolessness, and impure, the practitioners often think that the four things are not separated, and the ‘Si Yi Zhi’ will be got”²⁷.

In this sutra, it also points out the “six things of shou yi”, which are “shu xi”, “sui xing”, “zhi”, “guan”, “huan”, “jing”, And these six things correspond one by one with Bodhipakkhiyadhamma, and the “Si Yi Zhi” correspond to the “count breath”. As we know from the past, the “Fo shuo da an ban shou yi jing” was translated by An Shigao in Luoyang in 147A.D. It was also an important scripture of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in the early period. Because of the detailed explanation of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in this sutra, An

²⁶ 安士高 譯 “佛說大安般守意經”, 新脩大正藏 冊15, 卷2, No.0602。(中華台北, Chinese Buddhist Text Electronic Association, 2018), 171.

²⁷ 安士高 譯 “佛說大安般守意經”, 新脩大正藏 冊15, 卷2, No.0602。(中華台北, Chinese Buddhist Text Electronic Association, 2018), 171.

Shigao is also respected as the creator of “Chan Mathematics”. We have also said that the “Chan Mathematics” pioneered by An Shigao with his school has maintained an important position in the history of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness of the early period in China, but the scope of influence is of course mainly limited to the Sangha group.

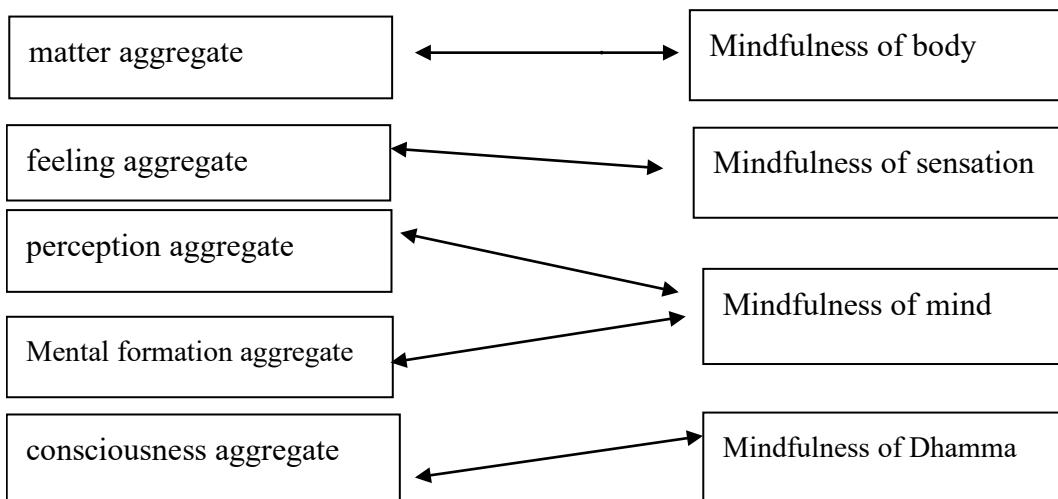


Figure 1 The relation between the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and five aggregates

Regarding the introduction of the Buddhist organization, the Sangha, the official history did not even mention his existence, and the clues we got in the Buddhist literature were almost exclusively about the translation of Buddhist scriptures. We can rarely collect information about the practice of the Sangha. From the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Sui Dynasty, it was the prosperous period of the Mahayana *prajñā* system. Therefore, since An Shigao translated the “Fo shuo da an ban shou yi jing”, there are few scriptures about the four foundations of mindfulness appeared, so that Huiyuan complained about the lack of Chan sutras. It was not until around A.D.410 that the Buddha-bhadra came to Mount Lu, and at the invitation of Huiyuan, he translated the two volumes of “Da mo duo luo Chan jing”²⁸. This scripture on behalf of Chan method of the Sarvāstivādin school, which introduced four foundations of mindfulness and count breaths, undoubtedly stimulated the monks at that time to the strict practice of Hinayana meditation. This sutra elaborates on the various aspects of the fang bian way of Anapana and the sheng way’s tui jian fen, zhu fen, sheng jin fen, and

²⁸ Its Sanskrit name is *Yogācārabhūmi*.

jue ding fen, and it has a strong guiding effect on the practice of Anapana. The practice of the Four Foundations of mindfulness is grouped into the corresponding levels of Anapanasati. The second volume includes various practices such as the observation of impurity, the observation of the difference of the realm, observation of aggregates, and the observation of dependent origination. Among them, the observation of impurity is also divided into tui and zhu. The Anapana of the first volume and the observation of impurity and the observation of realm are the styles of gatha, and the observation of Si wu liang, sensation, aggregates, and dependent origination, all of them are curnika. The verses at the end of the volume are gatha. The great influence of Buddha-bhadra in Chan is the first time that he brought the method of systematic Chan inheritance into China. Due to the lack of data, we can only roughly analyze that due to the lack of Mahayana scriptures that guide the four foundations of mindfulness, in the early two hundred years, in theory of Buddhist principles, the monks spread the teachings during this period, it is the Mahayana *prajñā* thinking, and in daily practice, monks still follow the four foundations of mindfulness method guided by the count breaths of Hinayana teachings. This is also the reason why Buddha-bhadra who inherit all the Chan ways of the Sarvastivadins school of Theravada is still very popular at this time. However, it was during this period that the translation of the " *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-śāstra* ", the Mahayana Four Foundations of Mindfulness are the most heavily written parts of the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, and this is the case, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness has entered a new period of development.

Conclusion

The exploration of the origin and development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China reveals a dynamic and complex interplay between Buddhist doctrines and Chinese cultural, philosophical, and political contexts. The introduction of Buddhism during the Han Dynasty laid the groundwork for its integration into Chinese society. However, it was during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties (220–589 CE) that the Four Foundations of Mindfulness began to significantly influence Chinese Buddhism. This period, marked by political fragmentation and cultural flourishing, created a fertile ground for the assimilation and transformation of Buddhist practices. The rise of metaphysics (Xuanxue), the flourishing of Daoism, and the influx of Persian and Greek cultural elements provided a rich tapestry for the reinterpretation of mindfulness practices. Early translations of Buddhist texts played a crucial role in this process, allowing Chinese scholars and practitioners to engage deeply with the foundational teachings of mindfulness.

The adaptation of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness within Chinese Buddhism was not a mere replication of Indian practices but involved a creative synthesis with indigenous philosophical frameworks such as Daoism and Confucianism. This syncretic approach resulted in unique Chinese Buddhist practices that retained the essence of mindfulness while resonating with the cultural and spiritual milieu of China. The historical trajectory of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China underscores the broader processes of Buddhist adaptation and transformation across cultures. It highlights the enduring significance of mindfulness practices in promoting mental clarity, ethical conduct, and spiritual awakening. By examining the political and cultural background of the Wei Jin period, the origin and development of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, and the early translations of relevant scriptures, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how these foundational practices evolved in the Chinese context.

In conclusion, the integration and evolution of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness in China reflect the dynamic nature of Buddhist practice and its capacity to adapt to diverse cultural landscapes. The enduring relevance of these practices in contemporary Chinese Buddhism attests to their profound impact on spiritual life and their potential to contribute to mental and emotional well-being in today's world.

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