

Bases of Success

October 19, 2012

The technique for breath meditation is not all that complicated. You take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where the breath is easiest to observe and focus your attention there. Allow the quality of the breath to be comfortable. Try not to squeeze it or push it too much. Let it come in freely, go out freely. You can either let it find its own rhythm or you can nudge it a little bit, to see if longer breathing would feel better, or if you'd prefer the breath to be shorter, faster, slower, heavier or lighter. When there's a sense of ease, think of your awareness spreading out throughout the whole body, and allow the ease to spread out as well. Some people find it easier to observe the breath if you think of your awareness spreading first, so that you're aware of the whole body breathing in and the whole body breathing out. Then you notice what kind of breathing feels good in that context. This is a matter of personal preference.

And you do that for a whole hour.

The complicated part is the mind. You have to bring the right attitudes to this, because you'll find as you meditate that the mind has many minds, many attitudes, and a lot of those attitudes can get in the way. So you've got to bring as many skillful attitudes to this as you can. Otherwise, the meditation is not going to work. It's not like a machine that you just wind up and it's going to do the work for you. You have to want it to work. It's a truth of the will: one of those things that's going to become true only if you want it to become true.

That's why the Buddha talks about the factors of success in the meditation—and he *does* talk about success. He's not one of those people who says, "Well, there's no such thing as a good meditation or a bad meditation. It's all the same." That's not his attitude at all. There is good meditation. There's bad meditation. You want to succeed at doing this. And the first factor for success is wanting it, desiring it. You have to learn some skill in how you apply your wants, how you motivate yourself, and where you focus your desire.

You focus your desire on the causes. If you focus simply on the kinds of results you want to get—if you read in the books about so-and-so becoming an arahant this way or becoming an arahant that way, and you want aim right there, without wanting to bother with anything between here and there—it's not going to work. You've got to go through all the steps.

So you focus your desire on the steps the same way as when you're climbing a trail up the mountain. You have to focus on where you're stepping right now, with each step. Otherwise you're going to slip and fall off. So the chants we recite before the meditations are one of the means for giving rise to that sense of desire. You notice we had that contemplation of karma at least twice in the chants tonight. And it's good for stirring up all kinds of good qualities in your desire.

First, it comes in the five reflections—at the end, after you've been thinking about aging, illness, death, and the fact that you're going to be separated from all the things you love. Those four contemplations leave you hanging. The fifth contemplation is what brings you home. In other words, if you're going to find happiness, it'll have to be through

your actions—because the world out there doesn't offer much. It offers some things, but then it takes them away.

If you want happiness, you're going to have to provide it through your own actions. That thought gives rise to a sense of what's called *pasada*, or confidence. There *is* a way out, and this is it. And how do you work with your actions? You train your mind. That's what we're doing right here, right now.

So that's one quality we're working on: *pasada*, or conviction. In the original sutta, the Buddha goes on to point out that this is also a good contemplation for heedfulness. You realize that if you're going to be happy, it depends on your actions, but your actions you can also make you really miserable.

This gives rise to a sense of heedfulness: that you've got to be really, really careful about your actions. And that means you have to be very careful about the states of your mind. The only way we can really observe these states carefully and deal with them precisely is through the meditation. So that's another way of motivating yourself to practice.

Then, at the end of the chanting, we had the chant on equanimity, which is also a way of thinking about karma as it relates to all beings. It's to realize that there are a lot of things out there that you cannot have an effect over. If you get worked up about them, you're wasting your energy. So what does that leave? Well, it leaves your own actions, that you can have an effect on—especially your actions right now.

So again that contemplation of equanimity is meant to bring you back here to the breath with a sense of desire that this is a good place to be. You want to be here. In another sutta, the Buddha points out that this contemplation that all beings are the owners of their actions reinforces a sense of *samvega*: that there's just so much suffering out there that we can't do anything about. And, of course, there are actions from the past, our own actions from the past, that we can't do anything about as well.

So these contemplations are meant to give rise to a sense of desire, to motivate us to want to practice, to be willing to give ourselves to the practice. This is not one of those experiments where you set up the equipment and then sit back and let the experiment do its own thing. You have to be willing to commit yourself. And this is what the desire is for, because you've got to make it work. If you have that desire then the remaining bases of success are a lot easier, in particular the persistence and the intentness. You stick with it. You give it your energy. That's the persistence part. You try to develop a good momentum that carries on through this meditation and on through to the next.

Ajaan Fuang talks about how our lives tend to be divided up into times. There's the time to meditate and then there's the time not to meditate. And the other times not to meditate are the time you do your work, the time you chant, the time you eat, or the time for whatever. But actually you should regard everything as a time to observe the mind and to try to keep the mind centered, regardless of what's happening. Because it's not the case that your defilements are going to come up only while you're sitting here and meditating. They come up all the time. And you want to be in a position where you can deal with them all the time—or at the very least fend them off.

In the end, you realize that the happiness and suffering you

experience in this life depends on your actions. You realize you're not making karma only here, while you're meditating. You're doing it all the time, 24/7 except when you're asleep. So you've got to be alert to what's going on in the mind all the time, so you don't let any unskillful intentions come in and take over. This is the element of persistence: You give the amount of energy that's needed to keep it going.

Then there's intentness, which means you really do focus your attention on what you're doing. You want to look carefully at the mind; you want to look carefully at the breath. Otherwise, you're not going to see anything. You're sitting here watching your breath. The Buddha was watching his breath the night of his awakening. What's the difference between his breath and yours? There's no difference in the breath. But there's a lot of difference in the powers of observation, his and yours. Intentness is what improves your powers of observation. You really want to notice what's going on: sensitive to how the breath feels, sensitive to the mind, to catch it before it goes running off.

Supervising all of this is the quality of *vimansa* which can be translated in a lot of different ways: your powers of analysis, your powers of ingenuity, your powers of judgment. You read the results of what you're getting as you meditate. And then you use what you've read in order to figure out what needs to be changed. This is probably the most difficult factor to develop of all, because it requires a lot of maturity. And in our culture we tend to be really immature around our faculty of judgment. Some people don't like to be judged. They want to be told that everything they do is just fine. Or when they judge themselves, they judge themselves as people rather than judging their actions. This gets them all tied up. This is one of the reasons why many meditation teachers say there's no such thing as a good or bad meditation, because they know if you're a typical American and start judging things, you're going to screw everything up.

But that's just a temporary solution. It's not a long-term one. The long-term solution is to learn how to become mature in using your judgment so that you can be self-regulating. That way, you can look at your ideas and at the attitudes you're bringing to the practice, to see where they're lacking and see where they're going overboard. You have to learn how to judge your actions and not come down on yourself for being really bad when you see that you're making poor judgments, or you've done something unskillful.

You've got to develop the attitude of a craftsman. You're sitting at your bench, you're working on something, and you just realized that you planed the wood a little bit too deeply. So what do you do? Do you throw the wood away? That would be a waste. Do you start yelling at yourself? That doesn't accomplish anything. You figure out how to correct for the mistake. And then you move on. Perhaps it's because we have so few physical skills nowadays that we haven't developed this faculty of judging a work in progress.

But here is your opportunity to do it. Remember the basic principles. You're judging the actions, not yourself as a person. And the purpose of the judgment is so you can apply what you've learned the next time around. If you're going to be noticing how other people are behaving around you, and you can't help it, learn how to do that in a skillful way as well. If they do something that's really obnoxious or really harmful, ask yourself, "Am I doing the same sort of thing myself?" This is what it

looks like when someone acts in that way, or speaks in that way. Take a good long look at it, telling yourself, "This is what I look like when I misbehave." If you see someone doing something well, take it on. This is a habit you can develop, too.

In other words, the purpose of the judgment is to bring it back to the next time you meditate, the next time you breathe in and breathe out. As for all the other unskillful narratives that we tend to build up around judgment, you can just let them go, like so much sawdust. Or Ajaan Lee's image of the person plowing a field: The things you've done in the past are just like the dirt falling off the plow. You don't gather it up in a bag and carry it around. You learn your lesson and then you leave the recrimination behind.

If you can bring these bases of success to the breath and bring these qualities to the meditation, you find what this simple, very uncomplicated technique really can accomplish in untangling what one of the famous verses in the canon says, human beings are 'We're a tangle. The world is a tangle. Your mind is a tangle. And so what we're doing is to use something really simple like the breath to untangle the tangle. You've got the technique. Now try to develop those qualities of mind around the technique: the skillful desire, the persistence, the intentness, using your powers of judgment well.

If you bring all these qualities to the practice, this truth of the will will become true. The results you want, the happiness you want, will become true, so that you can get beyond this whole problem of aging, illness, death, and all the uncertainties of karma.

Someday you'll realize what the Buddha said about karma really is true and that the escape from karma is true as well. The freedom is true. But you have to be true in giving yourself to the meditation if you're going to find this truth.