

Four Bases of Success

April 1, 2014

Breathe deeply for a bit to notice where you feel the sensation of breathing and try to stay with that sensation wherever it may be in the body. Then notice how long breathing feels, how deep breathing feels. If it feels comfortable, stick with it; if not, you can change the way you breathe: Make it longer, shorter, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Experiment for a bit to see what kind of breathing is best for you right now. And the word “best” here can mean lots of different things: one, easiest to stay with; two, most energizing if you’re feeling a lack of energy, or most relaxing if you’re feeling tense.

This is where you have to start exercising your discernment right at the beginning to get a sense of what the body really needs, what the mind really needs. It’s the same with choosing where exactly in the body you’re going to focus. If you focus on the head, sometimes it may give you a headache, so you focus further down. Some people find that if they focus down around the stomach, they start getting sleepy, so you have to notice what effect your choices are having on your ability to get the mind to settle down with a sense of alert well-being with the body right here. It gives you lots of variables and it gives you something to get interested in. As the Buddha said, a sense of interest is one of the factors that helps you to succeed at the meditation.

There are four factors of the meditation altogether that he calls the bases for success. You may have heard that there is no such thing as a good or a bad meditation, but that’s what they tell people when they’re just getting started and they might get discouraged when all they can see is how their mind is not staying in the present moment. It’s going off someplace else. But if you really want to be serious about the meditation and actually get some benefit from it, you have to gain a sense of what’s a good meditation and what’s not and how to learn from your bad meditations so that you can make them better the next time or improve them while you’re meditating.

The first base of success is desire. It’s part of the path that we chanted about just now. In right effort, you generate the desire to abandon unskillful qualities that have already arisen and to prevent unskillful qualities that haven’t arisen from arising, to give rise to skillful qualities and then, when they’ve arisen, to develop them as far as you can take them. There’s an effort here, and effort requires desire. In fact, the Buddha says all dhammas are rooted in desire. There’s no way you’re going to be able to practice a path without having a desire. It’s simply a matter of, one, focusing the desire properly on the right goal; and then two, after you’ve chosen the goal, then you have to focus on the path. If you spend all your time thinking about the goal, you’re never going to get there. You have to have a desire to follow the path: developing right view, right resolve, all the way down through right concentration.

Right now, we're working on the factors of right concentration, which require effort, mindfulness, and the ability to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being. You think about what you're doing here and evaluate how you're doing it. Meditation does require some thought. It's not like you're trying to banish all thought right away. Instead, at the beginning, you're learning how to bring your thoughts to apply them specifically to the present moment and to anything that might pull you away. If you find yourself being attracted to thinking about what happened today or what you're planning to do tomorrow, you have to think just to the extent of cutting off any interest in those thoughts, at least for the time being. Tell yourself that you can put them aside. You don't need them right now. You're working on something more important. Then you get back to the breath.

So you have to *want* to do these things.

And if you're sitting down and feeling not all that motivated, take some time to motivate yourself. Think about the good that can come when the mind is well trained. As the Buddha said, it's the essence of any skill that's going to give rise to happiness: You've got to train the mind. Otherwise, if the mind isn't trained, it can make a mess of things, even when they're going well. It's like having a little puppy in your house. If you don't train the puppy, it's going to make a mess, no matter how nice your house is. Your carpets are going to be ruined. It'll harass your guests. What may be cute in a little puppy is not going to be cute when it gets older, so you have to plan ahead. What can you do to get the puppy trained so that when you tell it to go to bed, it goes to bed. It knows where it can and can't do its business.

Of course, you've got a human mind, not just a puppy mind. Human minds are capable of a lot more damage than puppies can do. So your mind *really* needs to be trained. In addition to thinking about the drawbacks of not having a trained mind, think of the advantages of having a trained mind. You can be more self-reliant, more able to handle difficult situations as they arise, and actually more helpful to other people. As you become more reliable inside, other people can come to rely on you, too. You have more to offer the world. So, it's an act of kindness to be meditating.

And if you've been meditating for a long while, you might use what the Buddha calls a healthy sense of shame. Ajaan Lee made a nice comment one time. He said there are people out there who can manage companies that have thousands of employees or manage plantations that have thousands of acres, and yet here we have just four jhanas and we can't figure them out at all. Isn't it embarrassing? He means that as a way of generating desire.

This is something you want to do: to learn how to get the mind still, learn how to get the mind into an absorption here in the breath. So whatever you can do to motivate yourself to practice, bring those thoughts to bear, because it's when you *want* to do something that you really do it well. At the very least, that's one of the prerequisites for doing something well.

The next basis for success is persistence. You really stick with it, not just while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, but you also want to learn how to be familiar with how the breath

energy feels as you walk around, as you stand, as you lie down. When you talk with other people, can you stay in touch with how the breath energy in the body feels? Because when we talk about “breath,” it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it’s the energy throughout the body that permeates through all the nerves. You want to get more and more sensitive to those sensations of subtle energies and learn how to stick with them. Make this your default mode: that you’re going to stay centered right here. This gives you a good foundation as you go through the day. It’s not just one more thing to add on top of what you’re already doing. It’s actually a solid center from which you can deal with all your other duties and responsibilities as you go out into the world. We all need this center here because otherwise we get blown around by the slightest breeze. So stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. Learn how to pace yourself so you can put in just the right amount of effort that you can maintain.

The third quality is intent. This is the element of interest: that you really do pay attention to what you’re doing and you find it interesting to work with the breath energy in the body. They talk of the breath energy going down the spine: What does that feel like? Coming up the spine: What does that feel like? Which do you need right now? Sometimes, if you have a backache, it’s good to think of the breath energy coming up the spine to give the back some strength. If you’re getting a headache while you’re sitting here, then think of the breath energy going down the spine or going down the throat and down the front of the body. The health of your body really does depend on the energy flow; and here’s an opportunity work with it, to get familiar with it and figure it out, get sensitive to what it’s doing and how you could use it as a medicine.

And from there you start getting interested in the operations of your own mind. When greed comes, what incites it? Can you see it at the very beginning? Because it’s at the very beginning that you can deal with it most quickly and easily. If it gets entrenched, then it’s harder to uproot. So learn how to watch once the mind is still, learn how to watch for the little stirrings that would turn into thoughts, and gain a sense of how to read these inchoate thoughts so that you can tell: “Oh, this one is going to go in a good direction; this one’s not.” And if you know it’s not going to go in a good direction, you know how to let it go.

This is where the third basis for success, interest, turns into the fourth, which is using your powers of analysis: figuring things out. When you encounter a problem in the meditation, where do you look? There are two main areas where problems tend to start: One is your mind, the other is your body. Are you carrying some attitude in from the day that’s getting in the way? Do you have some wrong view about the meditation? Maybe it’s time to stop and think those things through. Resolve them to the point where you’re willing to sit down and meditate. Other times, the problem may be in the body. Are you focused in the right spot? Could you change your spot of focus? How’s the breath going? Are you putting too much pressure on the breath or too little? Have you forgotten some of the steps?

Ajaan Fuang, when he was teaching, would often use the seven steps that Ajaan Lee gives in his Method Two as his basic checklist for when someone was having problems in the meditation. Were they staying with the in-and-out breath? Were they sensitive to the breath all the way in and all the way out? Were they sensitive to all the different parts of the body? If you find yourself dozing off in the meditation, what usually happens is that your range of awareness gets smaller and smaller until it disappears. So if you find yourself having these little spells of blanking out, very consciously expand your range of awareness and keep it expanded. And notice: At which part of the breath cycle do you tend to let the awareness shrink? For most people, it's during the out-breath. If that's the case with you, be especially careful during the out-breath, that you're going to keep your awareness all the way down through the toes, all the way down the fingers, all the way up through the head, all throughout the breath.

Sometimes the problem may be that you're breathing too long or too short. Or you may decide that there's a need to pinch off the breath at the end of the out-breath so that you can be very clear about when it's coming in and when it's going out. Well, that pinching off doesn't help. It creates a lot of undue stress. As the breath goes out, think of the body being a mist of sensations with no clear dividing lines, into which the breath begins to come in. You don't need clear dividing lines. Just notice: "Okay, it's getting softer and it seems to be stopping and now it's beginning to come in again." That helps to develop the sense of what they call rapture or refreshment. If you clamp down too hard on things in the body, you may be able to keep your attention here for a while, but it's not going to be here with a sense of well-being.

With all these bases for success, the Buddha says you need to have a sense of when they're too strong and when they're too weak. When is your desire too strong? When is your effort too strong? When are you trying to analyze things too much? When is it too little? You've got to learn how to balance things out. That too is a part of the use of your powers of analysis.

So as you're working with the breath and things are not going well, try to take stock. How's the element of desire? How's your persistence? Are you really sticking with it? How about your carefulness: the intent, the interest you apply to things? This is often one of the biggest problems. We get familiar with the meditation for a while and then begin to take it for granted. Then we stop paying attention and just go through the motions. This sloppiness unravels all that we may have attained.

So you need the desire, the persistence, the intent, and your ability to analyze things so that you can figure out what's needed, what's lacking, what you can do. If you bring all these qualities to the breath, then you're sure to succeed at the meditation. Just make sure that none of them are lacking.