

## *Success Through Maturity*

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There are four qualities the Buddha said can bring about success in the practice of meditation, particularly success in concentration: desire; persistence, or effort; intentness; and using your powers of judgment wisely. Of those four, three are omitted in modern instructions in meditation. In fact, the three are said to be bad things in modern meditation. Desire is bad. Efforting is bad. Judging is bad. And even with intentness, paying attention carefully to the present moment, the meaning has changed.

A lot of this comes from the fact that most people are taught meditation on retreat in a pressure cooker atmosphere. People could have gone on vacations other places, but instead, they're spending their time in a meditation hall. And they want something to show for it. So to avoid explosions in this pressure cooker, teachers will say, "Have no goals. There is no such thing as success. There's simply the present moment," which may get people through the weekend or the week or whatever, but doesn't necessarily bring the best results in meditation.

There was a time when the Buddha once told the monks to practice breath meditation. And one monk said, "Yes, I practice breath meditation." The Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you do?" The monk replied, "I put aside hopes and expectations for the future, thoughts about the past, and—equanimous in the present moment—I breathe in and I breathe out." Which sounds like a lot of the meditation instructions you may get at a meditation retreat. But the Buddha said, "Well there is that kind of breath meditation, but it doesn't give the best results." Then he set forth his sixteen steps, which are very proactive. You make up your mind you're going to breathe in certain ways. Breathe aware of the whole body. Breathe calming the breath. Breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture. Breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. Breathe in a way that steadies the mind, or gladdens the mind, or releases the mind, depending on what the mind needs. What all of these steps have in common is that they're very proactive. They're aimed at getting the mind into concentration. There is a purpose to all this.

The Buddha's instructions on mindfulness go right there, to right concentration, if they're done right. A lot of the reason for why those bases for success got pushed aside or even got a bad reputation is because people are pretty immature about how they approach their desires and their effort and using their powers of judgment. So this is an important part of our practice: learning how to be mature, how to deal with goals in a mature way, realizing that we've set ourselves a large task here.

To put an end to suffering requires really understanding the mind, training the mind, bringing the mind into states of concentration so that it can see itself clearly. That's a big task. Learn how to approach that big task with some maturity, realizing that it has to be approached

in small steps. There will be progress and regress, back and forth, as you get to know the territory of the mind. You have to learn how to bear the task with patience and equanimity, which doesn't mean you just simply let things slide. It means you put in the work, you make the effort, but you have to be realistic about the goals you're setting for yourself. Set interim goals so the task isn't too overwhelming. And, beginning with desire, learn how to be mature in these bases for success.

Mature desire realizes that effects come about through causes. If you simply sit there wishing for the effects without doing the causes, nothing's going to happen. That kind of desire gets in the way. If you've mastered a manual skill—a sport, carpentry, cooking, anything that requires time and energy to get really good at it—you've probably learned how to get your desire under control, get it focused on doing the steps right. When the steps are done right, the results will come.

In this case, directed thought and evaluation are the causes. You direct your thoughts to the breath. You evaluate the breath so that it's comfortable. And if it's not comfortable, you ask yourself, "What can I do to make it comfortable?" And when it is finally comfortable, "What do I do to maintain it to keep that sense of comfort going all the way through each in breath, each out breath?" As the needs of the body change, how do you change the breath to maintain that comfort? And then how do you let it spread? In the Buddha's analogy, it's like mixing water with flour to make dough. You want the water to moisten the entire ball of dough with nothing leftover.

So you knead the sense of pleasure through the body in the same way you'd knead the water through the dough. How do you do that? You figure that out. That's the way you focus your desire. And then you try to make it single-minded here with the breath. Anything else that comes up right now is of no interest, no importance. That's the kind of attitude you want to have. You want to make your desire focused, and focused properly on the steps.

As for effort, realize that there are many kinds of effort. There's the effort to prevent unskillful qualities from happening, the effort to get rid of them when they're there, the effort to give rise to skillful qualities, and the effort to maintain and develop them—all of which are different kinds of efforts. You can ask yourself which one is appropriate right now. And as for the amount of effort, it depends partly on the task at hand and partly on your strength right now: what level of energy you have, reminding yourself that the effort here is not muscular effort. It's an effort in the mind: the effort to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen, the effort to prevent unskillful qualities from arising again; the effort to give rise to skillful qualities, and the effort to maintain them. These are efforts of the mind, because it's very easy for the mind to start wallowing in a comfortable thought or a pleasant thought that has nothing to do with the meditation. So you have to spur it to remind yourself that you don't know how many more breaths you have. Each time your heart beats, it's one less beat between you and death. So you want to use those heartbeats well.

As for intentness, you're intent, you pay careful attention to the present moment, but not just the present moment in a general way. You pay attention specifically to what you're doing and the results of your actions. You really want to focus on that. The more sensitive you are to what you're doing, the more you see where your unskillful thoughts are hiding out or where you can improve things.

As for using your powers of judgment, it's very important that you not judge yourself as a meditator. You judge what you're doing. Judge your actions. And when things are not going well, learn how to be critical in a useful way, i.e., try to use your ingenuity. Figure out, "What's going wrong and what can be done to change what I'm doing?" This is the way the Buddha approached his quest for awakening. He made some pretty big mistakes: six years of self-torment. But at the end, he didn't let himself get down on himself. He simply said, "Well, that's obviously not the way. There must be another way." He depersonalized it. It was simply a matter of actions and results. And then he used his ingenuity: "Is there another way?" He thought of the time when he was young and had spontaneously gotten into the first jhana. He asked himself, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure?" because those six years of torment were driven by a fear of pleasure. And he realized that the pleasure of jhana was not a sensual pleasure. It was a skillful pleasure. It caused no harm. It deserved no blame. So he gave it a try.

So learn how to take criticism well, both external criticism and internal criticism. The criticism, to be helpful, is focused on actions and how you can change your actions to yield the results you desire. All these four qualities center on this, realizing there are causes and effects. So you want to do the causes. You put the effort in to do the causes. You pay careful attention to what you're doing, sensitive to the results. Then you try to figure out how to make those results better.

Those last two qualities are well summarized by Ajaan Fuang. I've said many times that the two words he used most in his meditation instructions were, "Be observant," and, "Use your ingenuity." Being observant is a matter of intentness. Using your ingenuity is the best way of using your powers of judgment to get yourself past an impasse. This is how these four qualities actually do lead to success in the meditation. You attain the goal that the Buddha talked about.

In the very beginning, you get the mind into a state of right concentration. From there, you develop insight, again, by looking at what you're doing and being sensitive to your actions and their results. These bases of success help not only with concentration, but also with the development of discernment, because the ending of suffering is possible. It's not simply a matter of being okay with whatever comes up. It's not a matter of lowering your expectations. You raise your expectations as to what a human being can do, as to what you as a human being can do. As they say of marksmanship, you don't hit any higher than you aim. So aim high. But learn how to live with a high aim in a mature way so that your immaturity doesn't get in the way of attaining the goal we all want.