

# The Four Bases of Success

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For meditation to go well, you have to like what you're doing—because, after all, it's a big job: working through all the many habits by which you create suffering for yourself.

So it's not something to do in a weekend retreat and then think you've got it all done. It's a long term process. And if you like what you're doing, it goes a lot more easily. This is why when you're meditating you want to become friends with the breath. Don't regard your meditation object as your opponent. Remember all that the breath has done for you. It's kept you alive all these years. It's what keeps the body and the mind together.

And even right here in the present moment, the breath can give a sense of pleasure if you allow it to. So explore that possibility. Get so that the idea of the breath as your friend is not simply an abstract idea. It's an immediate, visceral experience. You gain a sense of familiarity, a sense of liking the breath, of knowing how to use the breath to nourish the body. And whatever part of the body feels like it could use some breath energy, let it have some, no matter where in the body it may be. No matter how the breath is going to come in or how it's going to go out, allow every part of the body to have some breath energy so you get a strong visceral sense that the breath is a good companion to have on this path you're following.

The same principle works on the external level. The Buddha places a lot of emphasis on harmony within the *sangha*. That's why we have the *vinaya*, to make sure that our life here together is a life conducive to the practice. People get along because they avoid harming one another. Instead of being a distraction, life in the community then becomes an aid to the practice. Instead of dwelling on what they don't like about each other, the members of the community think about what they do to help one another. And each person is willing to go out of his way for the other people, to develop what the Thais call *naam jai*, which probably is best translated as "generosity of spirit" or "warm-heartedness," a willingness to go that extra mile. Community life becomes a life conducive to the practice. The practice goes a lot more easily.

You want the same principle of harmony inside as well. Learn how to get along with the breath. Don't go in with a lot of preconceived notions of what the breath has to be like. Explore. Listen to the breath. See what it has to say. What kind of breathing would feel good right now? Coming in where? Going out where? Allow it to happen. Open your mind away from your preconceived

notions about what's happening in the breathing, and a lot of different ways of breathing will become possible. Explore them to see which ones are really helpful right now and which ones are not so helpful.

As you get more and more familiar with the breath this way, you develop a strong sense of what in Pali is called *chanda*, the desire to stick with the practice. It's the first of the bases of success. If you want to succeed in meditation, the first thing you've got to do is to like your meditation object, to like the process of meditating. Allow it to capture your imagination. This breath energy in the body: How many different ways can it come in? How many different ways can it go out? How many varieties of breath are there? What can they do for different mental states? When you're angry, what's a good way to breathe to calm down the anger? When you're lazy, what's a good way breathe to give yourself more energy? When you're feeling not quite right physically, what kind of breath is good for you? As you set up these questions in your mind and begin to explore, you find that the breath really does become fascinating. Once it's captured your imagination, you can get absorbed in it.

The word *jhana* is often translated as mental absorption, and things are absorbing only when they're interesting. So see in what way the breath can become interesting. It's not just in-out, in-out, in-out. "How many more ins and outs am I going to have to count until awakening comes?" We're not doing this as a ritual, simply going through the motions and hoping that the motions will get us to where we want to go. After all they call meditation "practice," and as with any kind of practice—whether it's a musical instrument or a sport—it's how much attention you pay, how much you really look at what you're doing, how you find ways of doing it more efficiently, with less and less wasted effort and a greater sense of well being to show for it: That's what's going to improve it. And it all has to start with *liking* the breath.

The second of the four bases of success is *viriyā*, persistence: You really stick with it. You do it again, then you do it again, and then you do it again. You keep at it. Be a breath-a-holic. They say that when alcoholics walk into somebody's house, they'll very quickly pick up on where the alcohol is stored. That's where their antennae are directed. They may be missing a lot of other things going on in that particular house, but they're very quick to pick up on where the alcohol is kept. Well, you want to be a breath-a-holic. Have your antennae set for: How can you stay with the breath in this situation? How can you stay with the breath in that situation? You're talking with somebody you don't like – how do you stay with the breath? You're talking with someone you do like – how do you stay with the breath? You're working at a task – how do you stay with the breath? Where is the breath? How is it going? Have your antennae focused on that, and keep it focused there in any and all situations.

They've done studies of athletes – athletes who are talented and very good *vs.* those who are talented and exceptionally good – and basically, in terms of the raw physical strengths with which they're working, there's not that much difference. The difference between being good and being exceptional lies a lot in how much time they devote to their practice. And it's the same with the breath. You might be a good meditator. You've got the talent. It comes easily. But if you don't give it that much time, you won't take it as far as it can go, because a lot of the meditation lies in your willingness to give, give of your energy, give of you time.

Don't be stingy with your meditation. This is one of the reasons why generosity is emphasized as an important virtue leading up to meditation. Try to develop the mind state where you're happy to give, happy to share, happy to go out of your way. What this means is that you're willing to put forth an effort even though the results may not be immediate. You trust that in terms of the larger good, the long-term good, this is for your own true well being. And when you bring that attitude to the meditation, it's a lot easier to put in the extra effort, to put in the extra hours, to sit through pain, to sit longer than you might otherwise, to sit when you don't feel like sitting.

This is important. If you sit only when you feel like sitting, then that's all you know: the mind that likes to sit. As for the mind that doesn't like to sit, you never get to explore it. You never get to figure out why it doesn't like to sit. You never figure out how to work your way around its recalcitrance. If you sit down and say, "Oh, today's meditation is not going well, I'd better go do something else," that's the wrong attitude. The right attitude is, "It's not going well, so let's found out why." Look into it. As you explore the mind that doesn't want to sit, you come to understand it and you also come to learn how to work your way around it so that that's not the deciding factor as to whether or not you're going to sit, whether or not you're going to be with the breath. Over time you find that there are fewer and fewer and fewer circumstances, either inside or outside, physical or mental, where you can't meditate.

When there's a lot of noise outside, there's a certain way of meditating to deal with it. You can think of your body as a big window screen that allows the noise to go through. You're not catching it. You'll understand this only when you catch the mind in the act of catching the noise and complaining about the noise—just make sure that you don't believe the complaints. That way you come to notice how the mind grabs onto things when it really doesn't have to. And that way, by sitting in a noisy place, you learn something about the mind. You learn to work your way around the defilements that are ordinarily so powerful.

All this comes under the factor of persistence, just sticking with the meditation—not thinking how many years you've meditated in the past, how

many more years you're going to have to do it—you just stick with it right now, right now, right now. Don't carry the past and the future around. It's a burden. The present moment is sufficient for carrying the present moment, but it can't stand up under the weight of all your past and all your future. So when the meditation seems burdensome, just realize that you're holding on to the past of your meditation, you're holding on to the future of your meditation. Drop that and just be with the right now. That makes it a lot easier to just stick with it, stick with it.

Ajaan Chah says that sometimes your mind will say, "How much longer am I going to sit here?" And your answer should be, "I don't know. Let's see. Can I sit with this breath? Can I sit with the next breath?" Sit with one breath at a time and you find after a while that you get a lot of breaths under your belt without you're having to carry them around or find them oppressive or burdensome. That's persistence, the second of the bases for success.

The third in Pali is called *citta*, which means that you're really intent on what you're doing, you pay attention, you notice things. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. Be as sensitive as possible to what state your mind is in as you're coming into the meditation. Sometimes you're coming in with an overactive mind, sometimes with an underactive mind, sometimes with a discouraged mind. If that's the case, you have to stop before you focus on the breath and straighten out the mind a little bit. Figure out ways of thinking that bring the mind more into balance. Or if it's simply a question of too much or too little energy, then figure out what kind of breathing would be good for a mind with too much energy, what breathing is good for a mind with too little energy. Focus on that.

Try to be sensitive to what you're doing and the results that you're getting. Understand that you're not here waiting for the future or anticipating things in the future to come, but paying very careful attention to what you're doing right now. If you lose that focus, then you've lost the focus of the meditation. If you're sitting and anticipating, remember that right anticipation is not one of the factors of the path—it's certainly not one of the factors of concentration. Just focus on what you've already got.

And the next question is, "What would be a more pleasant breath?" Be sensitive. The more sensitive you are to how your breathing feels throughout the body, the more you'll know intuitively what kind of breathing will feel good. So again, we're not just going through the motions. We're trying to watch each time we breathe to see if we can catch something in the breathing that we didn't notice before—particularly in the direction of figuring out what kind of breathing would feel better right now, "better" being defined by what the body needs,

what the mind needs at that particular moment. This requires that you be very attentive to what you're doing.

If you simply follow the steps that you've read in a book without applying this quality of attentiveness, you never develop your own discernment. Simply going through the motions doesn't do it. You have to watch. You have to make the practice *your* practice through your quality of attention, intentness. You're not here to learn about Buddhism, you're here to learn about your own mind. Buddhism gives you the tools. It points you to places where you might see something interesting, but it's up to you to see.

The fourth quality in Pali is *vimansa*, and it's translated in lots of different ways. Basically it comes down to the mind's analytical abilities. We're often taught, "Get away from the discriminating mind. Allow everything to be one," but I haven't seen that in the Buddha's teaching. The "oneness" lies in being focused with a sense of oneness with the object. But you have to be discriminating in how you're doing it, so if things are not going well you've got to figure out what might be better.

And that involves using your imagination as well—not in the sense of sitting here and daydreaming, but in the sense of exploring the possibilities for what you can do right now—thinking about what other kinds of breathing are possible, what other kinds of ways of focusing are possible. If the mind is in no mood to stay with the breath, what other topics can you think about? When you come up with a tactic, try it, put it to work, and then be very judicious in how you look at the results. If your tactic seems to be working, continue with it. If you begin to notice that it's not really working, be willing to drop it.

Think about the Buddha when he had gone through all those years of austerities. He had tried all the austerities he'd ever heard of or could imagine, but none of them had worked. He'd lived the life of a prince in a palace with all kinds of pleasures, but *that* hadn't worked in yielding the Deathless. You can imagine how totally lost he must have felt at that point. But then he was able to stop and think, "Well, what other alternatives are there?" He thought of the time when as a child he'd sat under a tree and his mind had settled into concentration with a sense of ease and well-being. *That* required an act of imagination, not only in memory but also in coming up with that particular memory and deciding that he wanted to try that approach next—realizing that it was the middle way between two extremes.

He'd been thinking only in extremes. And all too often, when we're faced with issues coming up in the meditation, we tend to think in terms of one extreme or the other. We can only see a few alternatives and when we've exhausted those alternatives we feel pretty lost. That's when you have to realize that there must be other alternatives. You may be framing the issue the wrong

way. Step back a bit and think about what other alternatives there might be. All of this comes under *vimansa*: your ability to analyze, your ability to play with what you're doing, to come up with other possibilities, to try them out.

And it's these qualities all together—liking the meditation: the desire to do it; the persistence: sticking with it no matter how much you do or don't want to, but knowing that deep down inside that this is what you want to do; being attentive; and using your powers of analysis: These are the things that bring success in meditation. Some people shrink from using the word, "success," in connection with meditation, for if there's success there's also failure. They don't want failure to be possible, so they define it out of existence. But there are ways of getting better results in the meditation and there are ways of missing out on the results that you could get. So think of it more in the terms of getting the most out of the meditation, exploring it to see how far it can go, using these qualities, because these are the qualities that are required.

When you stop and think about it, these qualities underlie any kind of success in any activity. You have to like to do it. You have to be persistent. You have to be attentive, to use your powers of analysis. These apply to any and all jobs. And if you're the sort of person who takes pride in doing a job well, you've already developed a lot of the psychological attitudes you need for the meditation to work well. Slapdash meditation gives only slapdash results. Meditation that's done with a sense of properly focused desire, focused on the causes of what you want; persistence; intentness, sensitivity; using your powers of analysis and imagination properly focused—that kind of meditation opens up all kinds of possibilities, brings all kinds of results that you wouldn't have gotten otherwise.

So, more than anything else, it's what you bring to the meditation that determines the results you'll get. The exercises are there. They're in the book. But in following them so that they'll get results, you have to bring these qualities, too. This is what you add to the picture; this is what you add to the equation. These qualities are what make all the difference—and that's the best thing about the practice. It depends on what you bring to it; it depends on what you give to it. This places the responsibility on you—but it also places the power in your hands.