



BASES
FOR
SUCCESS

Bases for Success

Six Dhamma Talks
On the Four Iddhipādas

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Four Bases for Success

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Toward the end of his life, the Buddha gave a list of the seven most important teachings that he wanted his monastic and lay followers to continue to practice in order to keep the Dhamma alive. On the list were the four bases for success. Nowadays, though, you hardly hear any reference to the bases for success at all. This may be due to the fact that they deal directly with concentration, whereas in modern Dhamma, mindfulness practice and concentration practice have been separated, and concentration has been downplayed. Also, when you look at the list of qualities included under the bases for success, you find only one that's emphasized in modern mindfulness. That's intentness. The other three—desire, effort, using your powers of judgment—are all considered antithetical to proper mindfulness practice as it's generally taught now. But they're a necessary part of concentration—and they're also a necessary part of mindfulness as the Buddha taught it himself.

So if you want to succeed at your meditation—and the Buddha was very unabashed about talking about succeeding at meditation, the fact that there are good meditations and bad meditations, and that you want to work toward the good and succeed at doing your meditation well—it's good to know these qualities and to develop them.

The Buddha describes them as four types of concentration: concentration based on desire and the fabrications of exertion; concentration based on effort and the fabrications of exertion; concentration based on intent and the fabrications of exertion; and finally, concentration based on *vimaṅsā*—a Pali term that has many meanings in English. It can mean your powers of judgment. This is like to translate it as “circumspection.” It can also mean powers of analysis, your ingenuity—in other words, the active part of the mind that likes to figure things out. This quality, too, when combined with the fabrications of exertion, leads to concentration.

Now, even though these sound like four different types of concentration, the difference is more a matter of emphasis, because you're going to need all

four qualities—desire, effort, intent, and your powers of judgment, your circumspection—for any concentration to progress well. To begin with, you have to want to do it; you have to put in some effort; you have to be really intent on what you're doing and pay careful attention. Ajaan Suwat would emphasize this point a lot. He'd say repeatedly, "Don't just go through the motions. Really pay attention to what you're doing and what's coming out as a result." And then use your powers of judgment to figure out what's going well, what's not going well, so that you can make your practice more of a skill.

For instance, with the breath, it's good to remind yourself of why you want to be with the breath. It's the force of life. Of all the elements of the body, it's the most responsive to the mind. If you want to sit here for long periods of time, it's good to be able to play with the breath, making it comfortable, and then spreading that sense of comfortable breath throughout the body so that it's pleasant to be here.

So look at your breathing. We're here not for the sake of the breath—we're here to use the breath for a higher purpose—but learn how to transfer your desire for that higher purpose to the causes that'll get you there. In this case, the cause is being able to stay with the breath, *wanting* to stay with the breath. The more comfortable you can make the breath, the easier it'll be to want to stay here.

And if it's not comfortable, you use your effort and persistence to make it comfortable. Try longer breathing, shorter breathing, fast breathing, slow breathing, heavy, light, deep, shallow. At the same time, use effort on the mind. If the mind is wandering off, you bring it right back. It wanders off again, you bring it right back again. You've got to show the mind that you mean business. Otherwise, it'll punch in the clock and then go off and sleep under a tree someplace. So look at your mind: What skillful things are coming up right now, and how can you encourage them? As for unskillful things, how do you put them aside?

This is where the fabrications of exertion come in. It's a technical term. Basically, it refers to three kinds of fabrication: bodily, verbal, and mental. Fabrication, *saṅkhāra*, means the act of intentionally putting something together. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath. Verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself—in the Buddha's terms, it's directed thought and evaluation. Mental fabrication has to do with perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the

images by which the mind communicates with itself, either with pictures or with single words, assigning meanings to things so that you can recognize what they are. And feelings are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain.

These things all respond to your intentions, and they have an impact on how you experience the body, how you experience the mind. This is why they're essential to all four types of concentration. So if the mind is wandering off, you first focus on bodily fabrication. Ask yourself, "How am I breathing right now? Is it aggravating things so that it makes the mind want to wander off?" Or if anger, greed, or fear has taken hold of the mind, what have they done to the breath? Can you consciously get it back? If they've kidnapped your breath, you can seize it back.

As for verbal fabrication, how are you talking to yourself? Are you talking to yourself about how much you don't like this or that thing outside? If so, you can ask yourself, "Is this a worthwhile use of your time?" When you're angry at somebody, it's as if you're picking up a hot coal to throw at them. Well, you've already picked up the hot coal. It's already burning your hand. See if you can think about the issue in other ways. For instance, with someone who's done something you don't like, you can look for things they may have done that are actually good, so that you can give rise to a sense of goodwill toward that person. That attitude of goodwill will then allow you to put the issue down. You can get back to the breath.

As for mental fabrication, think of that image of the burning coal: It's a perception, a useful perception to develop to help you see the anger as something you don't want to hold onto. Look for any other perceptions that are aggravating the mind, making it want to wander off into unskillful territory, and see if you can replace them with perceptions that are more conducive to wanting to stay.

You could sit here thinking about all the things that are wrong right now: wrong with your body, wrong with the situation around you, wrong with the world. And what you've succeeded in doing is making yourself miserable for the hour. Or you could focus on the things that are right. The weather's cool. Things are quiet. You have no responsibilities at the moment. And you get back to the breath.

So you look at how the mind is creating problems for itself and realize that it's a matter of fabrication. You don't have to put things together in that way. You can put things together in another way. That's what's meant by the fabrications of exertion: You make the effort to change the way you fabricate your sense of the body, your internal speech, and your mind. These fabrications are most directly related to the base for success related to effort but they relate to all the others as well.

For example, when you want to be intent on the breath, you can ask yourself: How do you talk to yourself to make yourself really interested in what's going on, really interested in what you're doing so that you can give it your full attention?

After all, here we are in the present moment, the same place where the Buddha gained awakening, watching our breath, the same thing he was watching. So what's the difference? The difference is that he was paying careful, careful attention, both to his breath and to his mind.

And when you pay careful attention, what are you going to see? You're going to see things that are going well and things that are not going so well. You have to learn how to judge the difference. That's what the fourth base for success is all about. But it doesn't stop simply with passing judgment. You're passing judgment the same way that a carpenter would pass judgment on, say, a piece of furniture that he's working on. You're judging a work in progress. You plane the wood and you say, "Whoops, there's a nick." You planed it unevenly. Well, what do you do? You don't throw it out. You figure out ways to fix it. You approach the meditation as a craftsperson.

When things aren't going well, the craftsperson says, "What can we do to make it better? What can we do to compensate for mistakes in the past and to make sure we don't repeat those mistakes in the future?" In other words, you let the whole process engage your imagination, engage your interest. So you try to figure it out, at the same time being circumspect about what you're doing. You try one solution and find that it may be good for one purpose, but if it creates a problem someplace else, you learn how to make adjustments again. You use all your intelligence, all around, to get this to work.

Now, you'll notice that these four qualities work intimately together: the desire and the intent in particular. If you don't want to do the meditation, it's very hard to pay careful attention. If you're not paying careful attention, how

can you figure out what's going right, what's going wrong? And when you figure something out, what does it mean unless you actually make an effort to use that judgment to make things better? So all four qualities work together. As I said earlier, it's simply a matter of which one you're going to emphasize.

So it's good to keep these qualities in mind as you're sitting down to meditate, approaching it as a skill. If things are not going well, ask yourself, "Which quality is missing?" And how do you breathe, how do you talk to yourself, how do you adjust your perceptions so that you can get things to go better? After all, we are working toward a goal here. The goal is our true happiness.

The Buddha wasn't the sort of person to tell you to practice without a goal or without any gaining mind. He was very clear about the fact that we are trying to gain concentration, we are trying to gain discernment, we are trying to gain release. He would often use images of investment. You invest your time and energy in things that will give a good return. So success is a valid issue. We're here because we do want to gain peace of mind. We want to gain a genuine happiness, a happiness that doesn't disappoint, a happiness that doesn't place any burdens on anybody, a happiness that causes no harm to anyone. That's a noble goal, and so we should do our best to focus on the causes that will enable us to succeed in attaining it.

Generating Desire

December 29, 2018

We go through life propelled by our desires. Sometimes we get what we want and we're satisfied for a while, and then we're not so satisfied, so we generate more desires. We take it for granted that that's simply the way things have to be. Some of us think that, well, maybe if we get a lot of things, they'll make up for the lack of other things. So people amass things—amass power, amass wealth—thinking that a little wealth didn't satisfy but maybe a lot of wealth will; or a few things didn't satisfy but maybe a lot will; or one partner didn't satisfy so maybe a lot of partners will.

But that wasn't the Buddha's approach. He wanted to find something that left no need for further desire. But then he also discovered that he really had to desire it to find it.

There's a passage where, after he gained his awakening, he said, "All things are rooted in desire." "Thing": The word here is *dhammas*, and that can mean both good and bad phenomena. Everything you experience, he said, is rooted in desire someplace. After all, when you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think about things, you're not simply a passive recipient. You're out there looking for things to sense, looking for pleasures, looking for some satisfaction. That active side is rooted in desire.

But then nibbana, the Buddha said, is the ending of all dhammas. It's the one thing that's not rooted in desire. But to get there requires desire.

This is why desire's one of the bases for success. The image that Ven. Ananda gives is of going to a park. To get there, you first need to have the desire to go, seeing that it's worth the effort. But then when you get to the park, the desire's gone.

Now imagine a park that would be so totally satisfactory you wouldn't desire anything else in life. That would be nibbana. But such a satisfaction seems so far away and so improbable, and the path seems so hard, that we find ourselves saying, "Well, maybe I'll put up with x or put up with y , and that'll be

good enough for me.” In this way, we sell ourselves short. We have the potential to find something that puts us beyond the need for desire, and yet we go around desiring and looking for other things. The Buddha called those other things the objects of an ignoble search. The noble search is the search for what’s deathless.

So you have to ask yourself, “How much do you want it?”

This is where motivation comes in. The Buddha focused on heedfulness as an ideal kind of motivation: “One who sees danger and respects being heedful,” as in the chant just now. The phrase, “seeing danger,” is one of those fanciful etymologies that come from the Commentary: They take the word *bhikkhu*, monk, and they cut it into two syllables and they decide, from the meaning of each syllable, that it means “one who sees danger.” It’s fanciful, but it is appropriate as an educational etymology—in other words, an explanation that tries to get a fruitful meaning out of the word regardless of whether it’s etymologically true. When you hear the word *bhikkhu*, it’s useful to think, “someone who sees danger.”

Because that’s precisely what the Buddha was: someone who saw danger. He had all kinds of wealth, all kinds of sensual pleasures, the potential for all kinds of power, but he saw danger in all these things. You get used to them and you’re going to lose them, so you fight to save them. But then you lose them, anyhow. And what happens then? You fall. And you don’t just suffer when you fall. You take out your suffering on others, which will make you fall even further. Seeing the danger in that, he said, “I’ve got to find something else.”

So when you look at your own desires of what you want in life, ask yourself: Do you see danger in what you desire?

This evening I was reading a passage by Ajaan Chah where he said when he ordained first as a novice he didn’t see any danger in life, he didn’t really understand what ordaining was all about. But then as he became a monk and started studying, he began to realize that there’s danger in all kinds of things, especially the things that are really attractive. He said it was like seeing the best kind of banana they have in Thailand, *kluai naam waa*, but realizing that there’s poison in it. No matter how much you like that particular kind of banana, knowing that there’s poison there, you avoid it.

So when you find yourself wanting something that's going to let you down, remind yourself of the poison. The same if you find yourself indulging in some sort of addictive behavior, whether it's substance abuse or emotion abuse—in other words, letting yourself stew in emotions that are really not productive but you get some sort of satisfaction out of them: self-pity, resentment, or whatever it may be: Look for the poison and then remind yourself that it is possible to get past that, it is possible to get the mind in a state where it doesn't like that anymore, doesn't need it anymore. And try to cultivate a desire for a safe place. As the Buddha says, see renunciation as rest. See that by letting go of the things that you've been thirsting for and craving for, there's a greater sense of well-being and security.

Now, this doesn't mean, of course, that you give up all desires. You have to *desire* that state of well-being, but you have to approach it wisely. How do you get there? Focus on the causes, and see the path as something doable.

You might tell yourself, "I can't manage this path. I won't be able to get to the end." But think about this: When you develop the path, you're going to change as a person. The path will turn you into someone who is capable of reaching that goal. So try to put that fact in your mental calculation. As for the part of the mind that asks, "This particular course of action, is it worthwhile or not?" tell yourself that it may require a lot of effort, but if it repays really well, maybe it's worth doing. And if you tell yourself, "I don't have the energy to put all that effort in," well, that's one of the reasons we practice the path, because it gives you more energy as you develop it.

So do your best to remind yourself that this is a really worthwhile goal, something that lies beyond anything in our culture. Because that's another big problem in our culture: thinking that there's nothing to us aside from how we've been shaped by our culture. We live in a land of wrong view that tells us that this kind of path isn't worth it, that it's not really real, or that people who follow it are losers or deluded. And the media is so oppressive these days: People carry a little bit of the media around in their pockets and subject themselves to it constantly.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, people in general are disturbed by people who are more heedful than they are. They don't want to be told that there are dangers where they're finding pleasure, so they're going to dismiss you. You have to ask yourself, "Am I going to allow myself to be blinded by their blindness?"

You have to wish them well, but you also have to say, “I have to resist that particular influence.”

And it’s not just a matter of living in a country that hasn’t been shaped by Buddhism. Even in Asia, where there are countries shaped by Buddhism, people who practice have a hard time getting their families and friends to see that it’s a good thing. They say, “Do a moderate amount of practice”—which is the middle way of the defilements. They say, “Well, do it a little bit but don’t take it too seriously.”

So the practice is always going to be countercultural. This is why, as Ajaan Mun said, you have to replace the culture you were raised in with the culture of the noble ones. This is what everybody in the practice has to do: to adopt new values, to adopt a new vision of what is possible in life.

It’s through thinking in these ways that the desire to follow the path can get you on the right track. After all, the path, like everything else, is rooted in desire, and you have to keep nurturing that desire. And although we have Dhamma talks and books and everything to help you, you’re the one who has to read them and apply them and say, “This really does apply to me, and I really do want it.”

Think of the Buddha. He wanted this really strongly. He wanted it so strongly that he was willing to try anything, even six years of self-torture. Fortunately, we don’t have to follow that particular path. But you’re not going to get rid of the need for desire just by telling yourself, “Well, I’m just going to stop desiring.” You have to focus your desire on the right place: on the causes that lead to a result that’s really satisfactory. The end of desire is not simply a decision to stop desiring, or to give up or be apathetic. The end of desire is reaching something so totally satisfactory that you don’t need to desire anything else.

That’s the success to which these bases for success are aimed.

Learning from Desire

February 12, 2019

That phrase in the chant just now, “Those who don’t discern suffering”: It sounds strange. You’d think that everybody discerns suffering. Babies know suffering. They know enough to cry. Even common animals know when they’re in pain. But that’s not what the Buddha’s referring to. There are the kinds of suffering we all know about, and he lists them when he talks about the noble truth of suffering: aging, illness, death. He adds birth, which may be a surprise to some, but of course, people who’ve been through childbirth know that there’s a lot of pain, both for the mother and for the child. There’s the pain of being separated from what you love, having to live with what you don’t love, not getting what you want. All these are things we know.

But then the Buddha says something unexpected. He says, “When you boil it all down, it’s the five clinging-aggregates.” To see that, he says, is to discern suffering.

We also need to see suffering’s cause, which he says is the craving that leads to becoming.

How are we going to see these things?

By meditating: first, getting the mind to see what these aggregates are and how we cling to them; and then second, seeing, when there’s a state of becoming, what kind of desire leads there. Because with the aggregates, you’ve got what? You’ve got the form of the body. Okay, we’re going to focus on that as we breathe. We breathe in, breathe out, focusing on the breath. Then there’s feeling—the different feelings of pain there may be in the body—but we’re also trying to develop a feeling of pleasure by the way we breathe and the way we focus on the breath. Perception: the labels we apply to things, the images we hold in mind, the ways we communicate from one part of the mind to another with images and words. And so we have perceptions about the breath: Where is the breath flowing? When the breath comes in, where does it come in? How do you know a sensation of breath?

Then there's fabrication, the intention to do this and that, along with the inner conversation we engage in: what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. So we're thinking about the breath and evaluating whether the breath is good enough to settle down with; and if it's not, what to do to change it and how to change it. You can change the breath in ways that are not skillful—for instance, putting a lot of squeeze on it. But that makes it uncomfortable. You have to learn just the right touch. All this is part of that inner conversation. And then there's the conversation about how to take that sense of well-being that comes with the breath and then getting the best use of it by letting it spread through the body.

And finally there's consciousness, which is the awareness of all these things.

So all five aggregates are right there in the concentration.

And the question is, how are you going to get the mind into concentration without clinging? And the answer is, you're not. You're going to need to cling, but you're going to cling for the purpose of understanding. It's the same with desire, the same with craving: You need to employ these things in order to get the mind into concentration. And as you employ them, you get to know them well. I've known people who say, "Well, if you try to get the mind into concentration, or you want to get the mind into concentration, then it's desire and clinging and craving; and there's going to be a sense of self. And we all know the Buddha says there shouldn't be a sense of self." But that's short-circuiting the path right there. The Buddha's path is strategic. We're using things that eventually we're going to let go of. And we're going to be able to let go of them because we use them. In other words, using them skillfully is how we learn about them.

That issue with the craving that leads to becoming: On the one hand, you've got the craving to get the mind into concentration, which is a state of becoming. On the other hand, there'll be other cravings to go someplace else, other states of becoming. As the mind loses interest in the concentration, loses interest in the breath, it'll go someplace—either to another thought-world or into a world of drowsiness.

A drowsy state, too, is a state of becoming. It's based on the desire to have some rest. All too often we come to the meditation feeling really tired, and all we can think of is how much we'd like to get the mind just to be quiet for a

while and not have to think about anything, not have to do any work. So as soon as there's a sense of ease and well-being, we wallow in it and we get drowsy or we drift into delusion concentration. So there's the desire there—the desire not to have to deal with anything. That, too, leads to a state of becoming.

Then of course there are the more obvious states of becoming where you think of someplace else and your mind goes there. That's becoming and birth on the subtle level. Here again, the question is: Why would you want to go there? And part of the reason is that you're just getting bored with the breath. You want some entertainment. But there may be other desires involved as well. And you're going to learn about them as you keep bringing the mind back to the breath. Otherwise, you go from one thought-world to another thought-world to another one, like a hobo hopping trains, and you end up who knows where. If you're asked to trace how you got there, often it requires a real feat of memory. Things seem to modulate, as they do in music from one key to another key, getting further and further away from the tonic. If you don't have a clear desire to be with the breath, you're just going to wander off in these other becomings.

So you're learning about desire very clearly, and the desire is what causes you to learn in general. Ajaan Lee makes this point. It's because of our desire that we practice. It's because of our desire that we try to get the mind to settle down. It's because of our desire that we try to understand things. You look at how the Buddha taught. He didn't set out a view of the world right away. He set out a task. He said: Here's a problem and here's a way to approach the problem. Then you learn about the mind in the course of trying to solve the problem.

So on the one hand, it is good to know about things like dependent co-arising and the Buddha's analysis of the different stages through which the mind goes as it creates suffering. But you're really going to get to know those stages as you decide that you want to do what's required to put an end to suffering, in which case they're not just academic subjects, something you read about the Buddha's theory of the mind or whatever.

He provides these analyses because he wanted to put an end to suffering, and this is what he learned about the mind in the course of doing that. So when he started to teach, he would start by saying: Here's the problem, which

is suffering, and here's the solution. These are the steps: things you've got to do, the duties with regard to the different noble truths—comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation. And then as you pursue that desire to put an end to suffering by performing these duties, you begin to see: This is how the mind does this; this is how the mind does that.

So you want to make sure that your desire to get the mind to settle down is strong, but not so strong that you can think of nothing else aside from how much you want it to settle down. You want the desire to be just strong enough and well focused enough to motivate you to do what needs to be done.

As you tackle these problems that the Buddha proposes, where do you see clinging, where do you see craving? Which kinds of clinging and craving will be your friends for the time being and which do you have to let go of as soon as possible? These are questions you'll be able to answer for yourself because you want to. Otherwise, whatever comes up just comes up, we just accept it as it is, and it doesn't go anywhere. Or it may go someplace, but it may not necessarily be the place we want to go. But when you decide that you really do want to get the mind to settle down, you really do want it to be clear and alert, that's when you have the opportunity to learn about the mind.

I've mentioned that story that Ajaan Chah likes to tell about going to the market to buy a banana and then coming back with it. Someone asks you, "Why are you carrying the banana?" You say, "Because I'm going to eat it." Then they ask you, "Why are you carrying the peel? Are you going to eat that too?" And then Ajaan Chah poses the question, "With what are you going to answer them?" And before he gives you the answer, the *what*, he gives you the *how*: You answer through desire. You have to want to come up with a good answer. That's the only way it'll come.

In the same way, it's okay to want to do the concentration. It's okay to want to understand the mind. And it's through starting with the wanting that you're going to learn things. This is why Ajaan Lee, when he talks about the different mental qualities that go into the practice of mindfulness—ardency, alertness, and mindfulness—assigns discernment to the ardency. If you read the commentaries, they'll assign discernment to what they call clear comprehension of the three characteristics, which is their interpretation of alertness. But ar-

dency, the desire to do this well: That's where the discernment really comes from.

So as you try to figure out, as the mind wanders off, why it's wandering off, that's when you learn. When the mind is getting sleepy and drowsy, why is it going for the sleepiness and drowsiness? What's the desire there? After all, there are ways of dealing with sleepiness and drowsiness, and you'll discover them if you want to. You give the mind work to do. But sometimes part of the mind says, "Look, I really want to rest." So you give it some time to rest, but you have to keep it alert. Then, when it's rested in a way that's alert, you can tell it, "Okay, now you've got to get to work. You've got to learn how to stir up your energy, stir up the desire." In the Buddha's terms, this is called generating the desire to want to get past what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful. And as you deal with desire in this way, you're going to learn a lot about the mind.

As you try to solve the problem of suffering, you're going to learn unexpected things about the mind. The important thing is that you adopt the Buddha's strategy, because as he said, the desires or cravings that lead to suffering include not only craving for becoming but also craving for non-becoming. In other words, you've got a state of becoming and you don't like it, so you want to destroy it. That, too, can lead to suffering.

But it's not as if there's no way out of this conundrum. There is a way, but it's a strategic way that employs craving, employs clinging, and employs desire. You get the mind into a state of concentration, which is a state of becoming, and then use that as a basis for understanding other states of becoming, other cravings, other desires. That's how the problem gets solved on one level. Then you can turn that same mode of analysis onto the concentration itself. But don't do that until you've taken care of a lot of other distractions.

This is one of the reasons why the forest ajaans, when they teach meditation, don't lay out the map right from the very beginning. They say, "Do this, and then when you've done that, come back and we'll talk about the next step." So even though we may have read about the different levels of jhana and stages of insight, put those memories of what you've read aside for the time being and tackle the problem that's right here: How do you get the mind to settle down? How do you get it past its distractions? How do you get it past drowsiness? Take an interest in these problems, and they'll give you the sensi-

tivity and the understanding of the mind that you're going to need to tackle bigger problems.

So focus your desires right here to get the mind to settle down. And that'll open up a lot of unexpected things in the mind.

Persistence

December 23, 2018

Usually when we hear the phrase, “making an effort,” we tend to think of brute force. When the phrase is applied to the meditation, it sounds like sitting for long hours, walking for long hours. And often a long sit can be very instructive, but the real effort, of course, is in the mind. That’s the kind of effort you can exert continuously in all your postures, all your activities. And it’s good to remember that, because that’s where the real effort of the practice lies. After all, right effort comes under the section of the noble path dealing with concentration. And externally it doesn’t look like much at all—here we are sitting with our eyes closed, not doing much—but there’s a lot going on in the mind.

At the same time, you’re giving the mind something really simple to do, and that should be easy—you might think. But then the mind makes things very complex. It seems to be sending scouts out in all directions trying to check out this, check out that, listening to the reports. And we’re saying No to those scouts. We’re going to stay right here.

Notice where you feel the breath as it comes in. When we talk about being with the breath, it’s not so much the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the movement of energy in the body. This becomes especially important when the movement of the air in the nose becomes very, very soft and gets harder and harder to follow. It’s very easy to get lost. But if you’re with the body—your sense of your hands, your feet, your legs, your arms, your torso, your head, all the parts of the body—those parts can be very quiet and yet you can still feel them from the inside nevertheless. So move your focus there.

And ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel good in those parts of the body. You can make a survey: Start down around the navel, watch that part of the body for a while, and see what kind of breathing feels good there. Then move up the front of the torso, section by section, into the head, then down the back, out the legs. Back at the neck, then down the shoulders, out the

arms. Get acquainted with this territory, and then see if you can put your awareness of all those pieces together.

The effort begins in trying to maintain a very continuous focus. We hover around the focus as we try to adjust it. That's what the terms "directed thought" and "evaluation" are all about, trying to adjust the mind and the breath to get them just right. And you need to maintain a sense of the observer that's watching what's going on, even as things get very, very still. Otherwise, the sense of ease gets very strong and you'll just slide into it.

So that's one of the first lessons you've got to learn: Things can feel good but you can't go wallowing in the ease, because the sense of ease comes from being with the breath. If you drop the breath, you've abandoned the cause. The ease may continue for a while, but as it gets very fuzzy you get into a state called delusion concentration, where you're sitting here very still but not really alert. Sometimes, when you come out of it, you're not even sure of whether you were asleep or awake. It's hard to tell. That's not the kind of concentration that leads to discernment.

The kind of concentration that *does* lead to discernment has some discipline to it. That might be a good word to think about as you're meditating: discipline. You have to keep the mind disciplined. You can't go off running after your likes and dislikes or random impulses right now. You have a bigger Like that you're working on, something that's not random at all. In other words, you would *like* to get the mind to settle down, and that's a desire to respect and to be loyal to. So as thoughts of sensuality come up, you have to say No. Interesting thoughts about your work, interesting theories about the world, about politics: You have to say No to them right now. Your ideas may seem very intelligent, very insightful, but they're not what's wanted right now. You've got to work on this other skill, the skill of being very still, because there's so much that can be seen when you're still that you can't see when the mind is not still.

So you hover around this for a while and then finally gain the confidence that you can just settle in. Then, as you're maintaining that sense of settling in, watch out for the voices that say, "This is stupid. This is dumb. There's not much intelligence going on here." Remember, there are many different kinds of intelligence. The intelligence that can think clever thoughts and say clever things is only one kind. There's another kind of intelligence, though, that

thinks strategically—that says, “I have a goal. I want to do everything needed to work toward it.”

When Ajaan Lee talks about the different factors that go into the practice of mindfulness, one of them is ardency, *atappa*, which is basically the same thing as persistence and effort. And for him, ardency is the insight factor in mindfulness practice. The Commentary, though, identifies *sampajañña* as the insight factor. People who follow the Commentary translate *sampajañña* as “clear comprehension,” because the Commentary says that it’s the factor that sees things as inconstant, stressful, not-self—the factor that basically applies the three characteristics to things. But when the Buddha himself is describing *sampajañña* in the Canon, he’s not saying that at all. For him, *sampajañña* is a matter of knowing what you’re doing while you’re doing it. That’s why I translate the word as “alertness.”

When the Buddha explains ardency, it’s a matter of trying to do things well, realizing that there are going to be results that come from what you’re doing and so you want to make sure those results are good. That’s the wisdom: a pragmatic kind of intelligence that goes into right effort. You’re wise enough to realize that this is not something you simply study and think about. It’s something that’s meant to make a difference for the better in your life, and you’ve got to *do* it if you wisely want to experience those better results.

Think about the old classical division of knowledge into two kinds: There’s scribe knowledge, which describes things, has names for things, a knowledge that’s expressed in definitions. And then there’s warrior knowledge, the knowledge that comes from developing a skill and then using it in various situations, getting really good at it, learning how to apply it to whatever happens. We’re working on warrior knowledge here.

So the wisdom in warrior knowledge lies in the persistence—and that doesn’t mean just sticking at it. It means realizing what *kind* of effort and what *amount* of effort is needed right now. Sometimes, when something bad comes up, you’ve got to abandon it. Sometimes you’ve got to comprehend it. Sometimes you’ve got to work at making good things come up. Sometimes the effort needs to be pretty heavy-handed; sometimes it has to be very light as you zero in on the sensation of the breath and then just hover around it, watching out

for any little movements in body or mind that might pull you away. This, too, is right effort.

It's hard to say that right effort is any particular amount of effort. It has to be the effort that's just right for the situation. Ajaan Fuang made a comment one time that "The effort that goes into the meditation is not all that much, but you have to make it constant. That's where the real effort is, in the persistence." And because it is an effort in the *mind*, it's something you can do in all kinds of situations.

At his monastery, we had construction projects, and there were two kinds: the ones that would go on for months and months at a time, and the ones that happened on the spur of the moment. Ajaan Fuang would sometimes say after the meal, "Okay, today we're going to do x." He hadn't said anything about doing x to anybody before that. All of a sudden: Meal's done, okay, we have to do x. We wouldn't stop doing it until it was done. And it wasn't the case that you'd put your meditation aside while you worked. That wouldn't have worked at all, because sometimes the projects would go on for hours. We had one project that started at 8 in the morning and didn't finish until 4 a.m. the next morning. If you didn't have an internal resource to draw on, an internal strength of mind, you'd get worn out pretty quickly. So you had to stay with the breath while you worked.

This is where you have to remember that the effort of the practice is an effort of the mind. You can be doing physical work while the mind is alert to the breath, maintaining a sense of your center. If the center gets a little blurry, you can start using a meditation word that you repeat to yourself. In terms of the physical effort involved, it's not that much. But there is a mental effort in trying to stick persistently with what you've decided you're going to stay focused on. In the beginning, it seems to require a lot out of you, but you gradually find with practice that you can stick with it for the sake of the long term much more easily.

This is another aspect of the wisdom of right effort: seeing that maybe what you want to do right now is not what's going to be good for you in the long term, and figuring out how to effectively say No to your immediate likes. This is a lesson we all had to learn as kids, and it doesn't change when you come to the Dhamma.

Some people like to think that when you come to the Dhamma, the rules change and you can think in non-dualistic terms, with no good or evil, no right or wrong. But the Buddha never said anything about not thinking in dualities. I mean, all thinking is in dualities—even the word “nondual” implies a duality between dual and nondual. Just learn how to choose the right dualities. Number one is: What’s the difference between skillful and unskillful? It depends on the result. There’s a principle we learned as kids: You do something well, and the results may not happen right away, but when they do come you’ll be glad you did it. Basic Wisdom 101. Delayed gratification. And it’s one of those things you should not forget.

I remember the story of a tennis pro whose game went into a slump. He could not figure out what had gone wrong. He changed his racket, changed his coach, tried all different kinds of things. Finally, after many, many months of trying to figure out the problem, he realized he’d forgotten Rule Number One when you play tennis: Keep your eye on the ball. So here the rule is: Keep your eye on the breath, on the sensation of the body here. Whatever sense of energy you feel as the breath comes in and goes out, focus on that. And don’t let yourself get waylaid. Any visions that come up in the course of the meditation, remind yourself: We’re not here for visions.

Ajaan Lee has a good way of dealing with visions. He says that if you’re experiencing a vision you don’t like, just breathe deep down into the heart three times and it’ll go away. In other words, the visions come because your mindfulness goes into soft focus. So by breathing into the heart, you’re reestablishing mindfulness clearly. Some people are afraid of visions when they meditate, but it’s not the case that genuine concentration is going to bring them into the mind. They usually come from the kind of concentration where you begin to wallow in the sense of ease and forget the breath. And in those periods where mindfulness is weak, that’s when the visions come. So reestablish your mindfulness and they’ll go away.

The trick lies in maintaining this very refined but continuous awareness. It’s like following a wire and not letting your eyes leave the wire at all no matter what happens. Then around that wire you can develop a sense of well-being and let that well-being spread to fill the body, but there’s still going to be that one spot where you stay centered. Don’t let there be any jumps or gaps in your attention, no matter what.

That's when the effort becomes right. Now, sometimes it'll require a lot of energy to stay and sometimes just a little bit. But you apply whatever effort is needed and, with practice, you learn how to read the needs of the body and the mind. If your focus loses track, don't get upset, just reestablish it. Have a very matter-of-fact attitude toward this. You find that as you develop your discernment to the question of what is the just-right amount of effort, the effort becomes right.

Intent

December 20, 2018

One of the phrases we chanted just now, “keeping focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world”: This is part of the formula for right mindfulness, but it’s also a formula for how you get into right concentration. And underlying it is a very important quality for succeeding in concentration, which is intent. You want to be totally intent on what you’re doing right now. Let the past and the future fall away. They don’t have to get involved right now. This means you can unburden yourself of a lot of thoughts, a lot of concerns. At this moment, the only thing that matters is the awareness right here in the present moment and your breath, and whatever thoughts help you stay with the breath.

Thinking *is* a part of concentration, but it has to be focused thinking. We’re not just randomly wandering around surveying things. We’re thinking about what we’re doing. That’s a part of intentness as well, because if you don’t think about what you’re doing, your concentration is hit or miss. Sometimes the mind settles down; sometimes it doesn’t. You have to learn how to observe it in action if you really want to develop concentration into a skill that you can tap into whenever you need it.

The Buddha didn’t teach hothouse meditation, in other words the kind of meditation that survives only in intensive retreats. There’s a passage where Mahanama comes to see him and asks, “What should I do to keep my mind in shape? I’m surrounded by my family, my children. I’ve got my work that I have to attend to.” And the Buddha said, “You can still meditate.” In Mahanama’s case, he recommended some of the recollections, such as recollection of the Buddha or Dhamma. You can get the mind into good concentration that way, but the same principle also applies to the breath. It’s something you can meditate on all the time.

After all, the breath is always there. It requires that you be very observant and very sensitive to what’s going on and how you’re relating to it, but other-

wise, it's with you all the time. So you want to think about the breath and your relationship to the breath.

In the beginning, it's pretty simple. The only thing you've got to do is to get the mind to settle down and put aside all your greed and distress with reference to the world, all your concerns about where things are going in your life, where things are going with the world as a whole.

You've got to take care of your mind because nobody else can take care of it for you. And if you really want to understand it, you have to watch it very carefully, because it has its tricks. There are large parts of the mind that don't want you to see them. There are areas we've all blocked off. If we're really going to understand the mind, we have to see through those blockades. And to do that requires that you have a sense, one, of a place where you can settle down and not feel threatened by what's behind the blockage; and two, you have to be non-threatening to what's behind the blockage. In other words, you have to show some sensitivity, some gentleness as you start poking around in the body and mind.

But you also have to be determined. You realize that it may take time and you're willing to back off when you have to, but your backing-off is strategic. You're waiting for a time when things will be ready to open up. And part of the skill in inducing that opening up comes from your being very consistent and very gentle with the parts of the body and mind that you *are* aware of. That's how the other parts of the mind begin to sense that, hey, maybe they can trust you. And the areas that have been kept locked off begin to open up.

That's when you can really settle into the present moment with a sense of spreading out. This is your territory: your sense of the body as you feel it from within, your sense of your mind as you feel it from within. Nobody else can move in here. They can do things to your body. They can show you things to get your mind upset. But you experience these things from within. The area within is your territory, and you want to arrange it so that it's a good place to stay.

Now, you can't be responsible right now for things that are going to come in from your past kamma. But you can be responsible for what you're doing right here. This is why, when the Buddha teaches about kamma, he talks about world systems evolving and devolving, and spreads his net really wide, but then he pulls it back in. The course of the universe, the course of life can go

over long periods of time, but it all comes down to actions. Where are actions happening? They're happening right here. What do they come from? They come from your intentions. So you're working at the source right here.

And the best way to get to know your intentions is to give yourself a firm intention to stay in one place. Be intent on keeping that in mind. When you do, you'll notice when the other intentions come in that would move you away. Otherwise, you're like a boat floating down the river. A little current picks it up and moves it in one direction. Another current comes and picks it up and moves it in another direction. And if you don't have anything firm to stay with, you have no idea of how the movements are pushing you or where they're pushing you. But if you've got something firm like a post, you can tie the boat up to a post, and with the slightest little change in the current, you'll see—if you're intent on looking—how the boat relates to the post. You'll notice, "Okay, something's happened."

And as you give the mind this place to stay, not only do you begin to see other intentions, but you also begin to see the extent to which your experience of the present moment is put together out of intentions.

Even though we talk about concentration as being a place where you can settle in, it's a house that you're constantly repairing, maintaining. It's a construction site. You want to be intent on making it good enough to provide some shelter from the elements, but you have to keep realizing that you're constantly putting it together, because things are constantly falling apart. Each present moment passes, passes, passes, and so you've got to prepare for the next moment and then the next. And where does the next moment come from? Well, part of it comes from your past kamma, but an important part comes from what you're doing right now. This is why you want to focus intently right here. In fact, according to dependent co-arising, what you're doing right now, your intentions right now, are something you sense prior to the input from the senses. That means you're priming yourself. So you want to look into the mind to see the nature of its priming, where it's pushing you.

And the good news here, of course, is that if you prime yourself in the right way or nudge yourself in the right direction in the present moment, then when things come in from the past, you don't have to suffer from them. You can develop the skills to handle them. The Buddha compares this to being a wealthy person. If a wealthy person steals a goat, the wealthy person may be fined, but

the fine isn't much. It's only a minor part of the wealthy person's general store of wealth. But if you're poor and penniless, they'll fine you heavily for stealing a goat or throw you in prison if you can't pay the fine, and you're going to suffer a lot.

So the skills you develop here in the present moment are a form of wealth. This is why you have to be intent on mastering them well. The Buddha mentions skills five altogether that, when you apply them in the present moment, can keep you from suffering from the results of past kamma. The first is training the mind so that it's not overcome by pain. We do this by getting the mind into concentration. We work with the breath, noticing the areas of the body that are in pain or tense and tight. We can work with those. And as we work with the more minor pains in the body, we begin to gain a sense that we've got some skills we can use to work on the major pains. This gives us a sense of confidence as we approach pain. That way, we can develop the right attitude toward it.

As the Buddha said, pain is something you want to comprehend. Particularly, here, he's talking about pain in the mind. But one of the ways you comprehend pain in the mind is see how it relates to pain in the body. When you work with the breath and have at least a part of the body that feels really good, it gives you the confidence you need in order to look at pain, to not get so worked up about it, to realize that pain is something normal. We have these bodies and they're subject to pain. It's normal. That realization is one level of protection. It cuts through a lot of the whining the mind does around pain, whining that only adds to the suffering.

At the same time, when you're probing and analyzing the pain, you're no longer the victim of the pain. In fact, as you're moving around, looking at the pain from different angles, asking different questions, you're more of a moving target. The pain can't hit you. Finally, you get to the point where the pain is not overwhelming. That's a good skill to have.

The second skill the Buddha lists is learning how not to be overcome by pleasure. Now, a lot of us think that would be really cool: to have enough pleasure to be overwhelmed by it. But it's dangerous. If you allow yourself to be overwhelmed by pleasure, you're setting yourself to be overwhelmed by pain because the same attitude applies in both cases. You're surrendering to your feelings, whatever they are.

Here again, the concentration helps you gain the skill not to be overcome by pleasure. If you're going to stay focused on the breath, you have to learn how to stay firmly with the breath even though pleasure's coming up in different parts of the body. A sense of ease comes into the mind as you realize that you can stay here and don't have to keep moving around. And there'll be a part of the mind that says, "If I don't wallow in the pleasure or gobble it down, then it's going to leave me and I won't get the benefits I otherwise could have gained from it."

One of the first lessons you've got to learn is not to listen to that voice. You can't just gobble down the good feelings that come with meditation. And you don't need to. They're there, and they'll do their work without your gobbling them down. You don't have to gather them up. In fact, if you gobble them down, you use them up. If you allow them to be there without gobbling them down while you stay with the breath, you're creating the causes for continued pleasure. This way you can be with pleasure and yet not be overwhelmed by it.

The next two skills the Buddha says are necessary in the present moment are, virtue and discernment. Virtue is a matter of restraint. You know there are certain things you could do but they're going to be harmful, and you can say No, you're not going to do them. This element of restraint moves from external things into how you approach your senses from within. There are certain ways you could look at things or listen to things that would give rise to lust or greed or anger. You can ask yourself, "Why bother?" And the ability to look in alternative ways, as Ajaan Lee says, allows you to be a person with two eyes. This relates to another base for success, which is circumspection. If you look with only one eye, you see only one side of things. As he said, look at both sides. If there's something you like, look at the side that's not so good. If there's something you don't like, look at the side that is good.

This relates to the other quality you're trying to develop, which is discernment. You use your discernment to say No to the unskillful impulses in the mind, and you do it in a way that's effective. You're not driving these things underground. You say No because you understand them. And the No that comes from discernment is the most effective of all.

Then, in addition to these four skills, the Buddha says to develop an unlimited mind. This has to do with your practice of the brahmaviharas, and these start with the breath. As Ajaan Lee says, if you don't have a sense of well-be-

ing inside when you spread goodwill, it's like opening a water faucet where there's no water. Just air comes out. And even though the flow of air may be cool in some ways, it's certainly not as cooling as water. It's not as nourishing and refreshing. So your working with the breath here gives you a source of cool water inside, a sense of well-being. When you have that, it's a lot easier then to wish well for others.

Then ask yourself, "Is there anybody out there that it would be worthwhile having ill will for?" Ill will certainly doesn't do anything good for you. It just aggravates the desire to do something unskillful. You have to realize that goodwill doesn't mean, "Hey, may everybody be happy just as they are." The right attitude is to understand that for other people to be happy, they're going to have to become skillful in their behavior. And that's something you can wish for anybody, no matter how bad or cruel they've been in the past. This means that goodwill can be universal. It can be unlimited. The same with compassion, the same with empathetic joy.

As for equanimity, that's something slightly different. But again, it's something you want to develop so that you can tap into it when you need it to protect you from past bad kamma—and from creating more bad kamma right now. Equanimity is not in and of itself a good thing. As the Buddha said, there are cases when it can be unskillful. You get lazy and say, "Well, this doesn't matter. That doesn't matter. Why bother?" That's not the kind of equanimity the Buddha was recommending. He's recommending the equanimity that comes when you realize that there are things that need to be done and you have only so much energy and only so much ability, so you have to determine what is the best place to invest that energy and ability. As for other things that would pull you away from that, you've got to be equanimous about them. You're learning to be a good investor, a good investor of your time.

You also realize there are some things you simply can't do anything about, no matter how much you'd like to. This sometimes has to do with things coming in from past kamma that just barge right in. If you learn how to be equanimous about them, you suffer a lot less.

So these are some of the skills the Buddha recommends for mastering kamma in the present moment. This means that as you're intent on getting the mind to settle down here, your concentration is not just a matter of being still and senseless—what in Thai they call log or stump concentration. When

you're settling down, you want to see and understand clearly what's happening. You want to see and understand clearly what you're doing so that you can develop some skills here in the present moment: this construction site we have here. You learn how to build things well so that even when the raw materials are kind of crooked, you learn how to make compensations so that you don't have to suffer from the crookedness of the materials, and you can keep building and maintaining a good house for the mind. It requires that you pay a lot of attention and that you're really intent on what you're doing.

This is what the quality of intentness is for, because it's one thing to hear about these different ideas, but it's something else entirely to actually see how they can best be applied right here, right now. That requires that you look carefully. You keep them in mind. But you've got to do your own looking. The more intent you are, the more consistent you are in being intent, the more you're going to see. And the more you see, the more you can accomplish.

Circumspection

December 19, 2019

In the bases for success—the four qualities that are needed for concentration to succeed—the fourth one, *vimamsa*, has lots of different translations. One is “discrimination” in the good sense of the term, as in having a discriminating palate. “Analysis” is another. The Canon never really explains the term clearly, so there’s room for lots of different interpretations. One of the Thai translations, and the one that Ajaan Lee uses a lot, corresponds to the English word “circumspection,” which literally means “looking around.”

When you do something, you look all around to see what the results are and you don’t jump to conclusions. You try things out and you stick with them for a while to see how they go. Just because something works once doesn’t mean it’s always going to work. At the same time, if something works for a while but then stops working for a while, that doesn’t mean it’s useless. You’ve got to remember when was it working, why was it working, and then file it away for the next time you might have to use it.

This is a quality we need as meditators. Looking around like this, you begin to see that some things that may not seem all that skillful to begin with can be put to a skillful purpose.

There’s a case where the Buddha talks about getting rid of anger basically through spite. As he says, you think about your enemy and you can’t tell yourself that the person is not an enemy. The person really is an enemy. So think: “This enemy would be really satisfied to see the stupid things I might do under the power of anger.” That way, you restrain yourself from acting on your anger. You hold yourself in check. Spite is not a skillful motivation, but it works in cases like that. So it’s good to have that filed away.

The ajaans often use the image of being a fighter as an analogy for following the practice. You’re in the ring, doing battle with your defilements. Some of the ajaans talk about just knocking out the enemy. Ajaan Lee, however, talks about sometimes converting the enemy if you can. You have to be careful. You

have to be alert. But there are times when you can use your desires, use your conceit, use your craving for a good purpose.

I don't know how many times I've heard people say, "Well I shouldn't have preferences" or "I shouldn't have desires, so I'm just going to act like I don't have desires." As long as you're alive, you're going to have desires. The problem is in deciding which ones are worth following and which ones are not, and to discern that requires that you step back a bit.

Circumspection, looking around, also means you have to step back because when you like something, you've got to watch out for the fact that it may color your perception of how things are actually turning out. So you need to develop the quality of the neutral observer, the observer who can step back, look around, and isn't predisposed to like or dislike what you've done. It's not that it doesn't have any likes at all. It does prefer not-suffering to suffering, so much so that it's not going to side with a particular action unless it really does lead to the end of suffering. And it'll want to check things from many angles to make sure that it's judgments are accurate.

It's through this ability to look at things from many different perspectives that you develop your ingenuity. This is another possible way of interpreting the fourth base for success: ingenuity. Circumspection and ingenuity go together. When you look at things from different angles, you begin to see, "Well, maybe I could try this. Maybe I could try that."

Ajaan Lee's instructions on the breath are a case in point. When I was in Singapore last year, some people were complaining that Ajaan Lee had introduced brahmanical ideas into Buddhism where they didn't belong by talking about breath energies in the body. Now, the Buddha never said anything about breath energies in the context of breath meditation, but in other contexts he did talk about breath energies filling the whole body. And there's also a passage in the Canon where the Buddha said that when you gain a sense of well-being, a sense of rapture in the meditation, you let it spread throughout the body—but he didn't say how. He left it to your own ingenuity to figure out how.

It was Ajaan Lee's ingenuity to figure out how to use the breath energies already there in the body for this purpose. Now, for a lot of us in the West, ideas of breath energy permeating the body are kind of strange. But as Ajaan Fuang said to me when I was first studying with him, it's simply how you feel the

body right now, the sensations of having a body, sensations you already have. Think of that as breath. Hold that perception in mind: “Breath” describes the feelings you’ve already got. You don’t have to create new feelings. Ask yourself: “If that sensation I have of, say, my arm or my torso or my feet or my head were breath, were an energy, what could I do with it?” Because that’s the advantage of this kind of perception: You can *do* things with these sensations that you couldn’t do otherwise.

If you perceive the body simply as a big solid lump, how would you spread rapture through it? How would you spread ease through it? But if you think of it as having energy channels—and remind yourself that when you sense the body, your first sensation of the body is of energy—then what does that do? What can you do with that? You can do a lot with energy that you couldn’t do with solids. So explore that. Hold that perception in mind. Think of this as an experiment. You’re giving this perception a try. This, too, is a quality of circumspection.

You don’t just hold to an idea because you’ve been taught it for who knows how long. You test it and you try to develop the qualities of mind that allow you to be a good judge of how well you’re testing it. And you find over time that by holding the perception of your sensations as you feel them as related to breath energy, it’s a lot easier to let comfortable sensations spread through the body.

And it’s a lot easier to sense where you’re holding unnecessary tension in the body, too. Now, there will be some tension simply in maintaining an erect posture. But ask yourself, “What’s pulling me out of an erect posture right now? Which muscles are pulling to the left, to the right, forward, back? Which ones are making me hunch down right now?” Relax them. Think of the breath going into them and relaxing them.

You find that with perceptions of breath energy there’s a lot you can do here with your sensation of the body in the present moment. In doing that, you also gain an insight into cause and effect.

This is another aspect of circumspection: seeing that when you do x , what comes about? When you do y , what comes about? And then you compare: Which is better right now? You may learn that what’s better right now might not be better tomorrow. That’s why this is called circumspection. You’re look-

ing around to see what else influences the fact that, say, long breathing feels better today, or breathing in long and out short feels better today, as opposed to tomorrow when it might not be so good. What's the difference?

It's when you ask questions like this that you see things that have been going on for who knows how long but you just haven't noticed. Your attention was someplace else, or you were asking other questions. Or maybe you weren't even asking questions at all.

As the Buddha identifies it, this factor of circumspection is another way of saying "discernment." It's good to remember that discernment has this quality. It's not simply a matter of agreeing with the Buddha that things are inconstant or stressful or not-self. It's an all-aroundness that looks for cause and effect, looks for situations, looks for conditions, that may be acting from unexpected angles. After all, dependent co-arising is an analysis of conditions. Do you think the Buddha could have arrived at that analysis without experimenting, testing, trying things out and seeing the variations that go up and down from day to day?

Ajaan Maha Boowa makes a similar comment about dealing with pain. Sometimes you have a perception about pain that allows you to stay with the pain for long periods of time without feeling threatened by it. Then you find that tomorrow the same perception doesn't work. So you have to back off, look around again. What's different about this pain as opposed to yesterday's pain? Often the problem is not the pain in and of itself. It's the attitude you're bringing toward it. It was that questioning mind that came up with the original perception the first time around. So you've got to nurture a questioning mind again.

So try to develop this quality of being willing to test, experiment, pass judgment on things, and then test the judgments again. That's where the discernment comes in the practice and that's when you'll start seeing results. It's not the case that we simply do concentration and then, when the concentration is mastered, work on discernment. As the Buddha pointed out, doing concentration requires some insight into how the mind works, how it wanders, how it relates to the breath. For some people, getting the mind to settle down is easy. They can get away with less contemplation in that area. Still, there will come a point where they'll have to start pushing the mind in that direction if they want to get beyond just resting in stillness. But for most of us, getting the

mind still does require that we try to figure things out. Think strategically about what it is in the mind that doesn't want to settle down and how can you get around it.

So step back, look around, and you'll end up seeing some things that you didn't see before, things that could be very useful. You may see some things that are not all that useful, but, hey, that's what experimenting is all about, finding out what does and doesn't work—and as for the things that work, when they work and when they won't. This base for success requires that some of your experiments will be failures, but if you know how to learn from failures, it all becomes part of your discernment. And it's all to the good.

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