

Bases of Power

May 15, 2017

One of the Buddha's many lists is of the qualities that help give power to your concentration. He presents them as four alternatives: concentration based on desire, concentration based on persistence, concentration based on intent, and concentration based on discrimination—in other words, using your intelligence. Actually, of course, all four are involved in getting the mind into concentration, but for different people and for even one person at different times, one of the four may be prominent. So you have to ask yourself: What does your mind need right now in order to give power to your concentration?

The first quality is desire. This, as with all four of the qualities, is something that has to be just right—not too strong, not too weak. If your desire is too strong, all you can think about is your desire and you're not actually focusing on the breath. If there's no desire at all, then you have to ask yourself what you're doing here. So you want the desire to be focused on the causes. Of course, the causes have their appeal because you know that they lead to good things.

This is one of the reasons why we have those chants at the beginning of the session, like tonight's chants on aging, illness, and death, and the fact that world just passes away—it's swept away, they say. They remind you of why you want to train the mind. You need something solid in this world. If you can't find it in the world outside, you've got to find it inside, and if you can't find it in yourself at the moment, you've got to build it.

So whatever your motivation might be, you use that to remind yourself of why you want to be here, especially as the mind starts to wander away from the breath. You've got to be able to pull it back, and part of the mind will say, "Hey, this is entertaining, what I'm thinking about here," so you've got to have good reasons. You can't just use force to bring the mind back. You've got to have good reasons to bring it back. Your desire for concentration, your desire for a steady mind, your desire for something solid in this world that's constantly melting away, can see you through.

That's one of the qualities. The next one is persistence—simply just putting in the effort. You start feeling a pain here and a pain there, and part of the mind says, "Well, that should be enough for tonight." You say, "No, I've got to sit longer." Put yourself in a situation where you've got to use the concentration to deal with the situation. For example, you tell yourself you're going to sit for a certain length of time. You sit for that length of time, and if pain comes up, okay, here's an

opportunity to work with your concentration, to work with your discernment to deal with the pain. There again, the persistence uses your intelligence. It's not just brute force, but it does require finding reserves of strength inside that you may not have realized you had.

One time very early on when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, we'd been working all day and then he announced that we were going to sit and meditate all night. I told him I didn't think I could do it. He asked, "Is it going to kill you?" "No." "Then you can do it," he said. Sure enough, I was able to find someplace inside me the ability to stick with it.

So sometimes when you challenge yourself, that's when you find the reserves that you didn't realize you had, and they're there. The part of the mind that says, "I can't sit any longer, I can't practice any longer," is just one of many voices in the mind. You don't focus on the parts that feel weak. You try to find reserves of strength inside and draw on those. They're there. We have a lot of strength that we don't use.

Part of the problem is that we tend to overuse certain parts of the body and certain parts of the mind, and other parts just get left useless. They're there. They've got potential, but we don't know how to put them to use. Sometimes it's simply because we've never been challenged enough to have to put them to use. Sometimes you'll find that putting yourself on the line like that actually does help with your concentration. Again, this is something that you do in moderation, but the point of moderation is something that you've got to explore.

Think about the Buddha's perspective on moderation. He'd been starving himself for six years, and for him moderation was having a bowl of rice gruel. You can think in the same terms about his ability to sit in meditation in what for him was a moderate amount of time but for us might seem extreme. So you want to push your sense of moderation to see exactly where true moderation lies. That's one way of strengthening your concentration.

Another way of developing power in your concentration is by being really intent, being very, very observant of what's going on. With each breath coming in, you want to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. When the Buddha talks about being aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, it's not just a vague, general sense of the body. You want to be really, really familiar with the different parts of the body. This is why it's good to have a body scan at least once a day. Notice how the breathing feels in the different parts of the body. If you find any tension in a certain part of the body, allow it to relax. When you've been there long enough, then you move on.

You may find that some spots in the body require more attention than others. All of us have some old wounds, either psychological or physical, that we're carrying around. Even the psychological wounds have some physical counterpart. They left traces in the body where the breath energy doesn't flow very well, or it's flowing in a strange direction, or it doesn't seem to flow much at all. You may want to spend more time with those areas and get sensitive to what works with them.

Sometimes they're like Orion, the cat here at the monastery. If you look straight at Orion, Orion runs away. If you look off to the side, Orion thinks you're not paying any attention. He just saunters on. It can be that way with some of these spots in the body. It's almost as if they don't trust you. They've seen you be abusive to them, so they're just going to clam up. The more you focus on them, the more they clam up. So focus off to the side. Work around them. Show that you can be gentle as you deal with getting the energy to flow in a healthier way, and there may come a point when the resistance suddenly collapses and things will really open up inside.

So learn to use your sensitivity as a way of getting yourself into concentration—sensitive not only to the breath but also to what the mind is doing. Be very clear about what you're doing, where you're focused, how you're focused, the strength of your focus. Try to notice things. This is one of the words that Ajaan Fuang used most in his meditation instructions, almost more than anything else: "Be observant. Notice."

This connects with the Buddha's fourth base of power, which is the power of discrimination, which is basically learning to use your active intelligence. You may say, "I'm not very intelligent," but intelligence is something that develops through being used. You look at what you're doing. You figure out what's wrong. If you can't figure it out, try various things, and when you've learned, "Oh, that was the mistake," then you learn from your mistakes.

A lot of us barge through life continually making mistakes and complaining about the results but then not doing anything about it. If you make a mistake, you want to learn from it. You've got to recognize it as a mistake.

Here it's something simple. You're maybe pushing the breath energy in the wrong direction or squeezing it too much. You can look at the cycle of the breath. When the breath comes in and goes out, do you have a tendency to squeeze a little bit at the point between the in-breath and the out-breath, just to mark it, to make it clear? Well, try not to. Allow there to be a natural flow from one to the next to the next to the next. If there aren't any little squeezes, the mind finds it easier to

settle down and doesn't resist being with the breath. The reason it resists is because there's a sense of dis-ease there someplace.

As for dealing with pain, as we were saying today, sometimes it requires that you breathe through the pain. Other times it requires that you focus on some other part of the body aside from where the pain is—one, simply to give the mind a good place to stay and, two, because often the cause of the pain, or to whatever extent the breath is related to the pain, is not at the spot where the pain is felt. Sometimes it's to the opposite spot. In other words, if the pain is on the right side, focus on the left. If it's in front, focus on the back. If it's in back, focus on the front. As you start dealing with your sense of the body as you feel it from within, you begin to realize that there are certain things that you thought were in back but are actually in front. There are a lot of parts of our body that we've mislabeled. So if there's a pain in the back, ask yourself, "What if this is actually a tightness in the front that I've interpreted as back?" Or vice versa. See what that does. See if you can switch the image you have of it.

This ability to play with the breath and play with your perceptions around the breath is a lot of what this fourth quality is about. In other words, you get yourself really interested in cause and effect. Some people have trouble getting into concentration because they have the type of mind that likes to figure things out and they're told to just be with the breath and not do anything. It's going to drive them crazy. They need something to think about, something to explore, something to figure out. Then the mind gets absorbed and can settle down and simply be with the breath with a really genuine sense of well-being.

So if you find that the concentration is weak, ask yourself which of these qualities you're lacking: desire, persistence, intent, or your powers of discrimination—which are related to the other word that Ajaan Fuang used a lot, your ingenuity. If you can figure out which is lacking, then make up the lack. It's in learning how to read your own mind that the concentration develops your discernment, and develops your sensitivity as to what works and what doesn't work. That's where the real discernment lies.

So we use these lists that the Buddha provided as ways of reading ourselves, and it's in reading ourselves that we learn the discernment that's not just from listening or reading or from thinking things through. It comes from actually developing qualities in the mind. That's the discernment that makes the real difference.