

Circumspection

December 19, 2019

In the bases of 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 its 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 looking 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 of 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.