

Four Bases of 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 of success. Nowadays, though, you hardly hear any reference to the bases of 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 of 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. The Thais 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 of 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 of 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 craftsman.

When things aren't going well, the craftsman 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.