Four Bases of Success, The

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The Pali term for meditation is citta-bhavana, developing the mind. But it also can be taken as a pun. There’s another word, citta-bhavana, which means developing intentness. That’s what we’re doing. We’re developing the heightened mind, or what they call heightened intentness. This is the quality that makes all the difference in training the mind, in finding the potential for the mind, is that you’re really intent on what you’re doing as you meditate. Whatever your topic of meditation, whether it’s the breath or a meditation word, it’s important that you be fully intent. Think of engaging the meditation with your whole mind and your whole body. This is one of the reasons why the breath is such a good topic for meditation, because it brings the body and mind together. Both get engaged, both get involved, so that you’re not holding back part of yourself. Immerse yourself in the breath. When the breath comes in, think of it coming in all around you. When it goes out, think of how it goes out all around you. Allow it to be comfortable, developing your discernment into what way of breathing feels good right now, what is right for the body right now. It’s an important basis for other levels of discernment further on in the practice. Sometimes, when you read some books, you get the impression that concentration practice is simply a matter of forcing the mind down. But if you force it down without any finesse or without any discernment, it’s like trying to keep a beach ball under water. You force it down, and as long as you can maintain your force, it’s going to stay down. But as soon as you lose your grip on the ball, it’s going to come shooting up out of the water. So the intentness here doesn’t mean just simply brute force. It also requires a certain amount of circumspection. In fact, there are four qualities altogether that the Buddhists say are necessary for success in the meditation. The first is chanda. The second is the desire to do it. You see that the meditation is something worth doing, and you want to do it. This is important. Sometimes we think we’re supposed to meditate without any desire, but you can’t do it without a desire. The Buddha once said that the basis of all dharmas is desire. All the things we experience have to have an element of desire. So what we’re doing as we meditate is to take that desire and use it skillfully. After all, we’re here to find the end of suffering. Why are we looking for the end of suffering? Well, there’s the desire to put an end to it. So be clear about what your desire is. Don’t force it underground by denying it. The Buddha once said that the reaction to suffering takes two forms. One, there’s bewilderment. You don’t know why it’s there. And secondly, there’s the search for someone who might know a way out, someone who can give you advice. A lot of times these two qualities, bewilderment and search, get put together in the wrong way, so that we’re searching out of ignorance or searching in ignorance, don’t understand the problem at all, and choose the wrong people to take advice from. We just get ourselves further enmeshed in suffering. But in order to put an end to suffering, the Buddha doesn’t suggest that we stop the search. We just learn to use it, learn to conduct the search more wisely. And the search implies craving. There’s got to be craving for there to be a search to begin with. The mind senses that there must be something better than this, that we deserve something better than this. If the Buddha were to have us totally accepting of everything that is, it suggests that we could be perfectly satisfied with whatever comes along. But the mind is bigger than that. It deserves more than that. And the craving has a little element of wisdom in it. It says, “There must be something better than what we’ve got.” But it takes a lot of skill to use the good side of craving, the good side of desire, so we don’t just tie ourselves up in more knots. But, remember, it’s got to be there. If you try to deny the craving or to deny the desire right from the beginning, you abort the whole practice. So when you sit down to meditate, you remind yourself of why you’re meditating, why you want to meditate. This is why we have that passage on goodwill. Because when you meditate, you’re showing goodwill for yourself and for other people, goodwill in that you want to work for your own true happiness. And working for your true happiness, you’re putting in a degree of anger and delusion. That’s for the good of other people as well. The Buddha never taught that there was a dichotomy between looking for your happiness and looking for the happiness of others. They go together if it’s true happiness. So the desire for true happiness is not a selfish desire. Because as you work for true happiness, your mind gets better trained and you’re creating a lot less suffering and stress for the people around you. So this is not a desire to be ashamed of. It’s not a desire to deny. Be clear about why you’re meditating. Remind yourself of that often to give yourself energy, because that’s the next step. You need energy. You need persistence in order to stick with it. The top is good meditation. They’re pretty ordinary, a meditation where just one word or a short phrase—the breath. You may meditate on a part of the body. Very simple, small-seeming things. What makes a difference is when you stick with them. Anything small, if it’s done repeatedly, can start making a difference. They talk about drops of water filling a huge water jar. It may take time, but after a while those little drops of water can fill the entire jar. I once saw some dynamiters in Thailand drilling a hole in rock. They didn’t have steam-powered jackhammers the way we have here. All they had was a little spike and a hammer. They just went tap, tap, tap with the spike and then rotated it 45 degrees, 90 degrees, and then tap, tap, tap again. They rotated it again, just around and around, and tap, tap, tap, not using much strength at all. When I first saw them I said, “My gosh, this is going to take weeks.” But I came back a few hours later and they had a hole more than a foot deep in solid rock. It was the persistence that made all the difference. So when you choose a meditation topic, you stick with it. You come back to it again and again. And then there are the two qualities we talked about earlier. Intentness and what you’re doing. Just really be focused on what you’re doing. Give it your full attention. Immerse yourself totally in the breath. Immerse yourself totally in your meditation work. In meditation work, think of the whole body, every cell in your body saying that word. If you want to put the meditation word and the breath together, think bhutto, meaning awake. When you breathe in, every cell in your body says bhutto, every cell in your body says to, when you breathe out. Don’t think of any part of your body not being involved in the meditation. When you breathe in, your hands are breathing in, your feet are breathing in, your liver is breathing in, your backbone is breathing in, every part of the body is breathing in. Again, when you breathe out, they’re all breathing out together. You don’t want to hold anything back. And then there’s a quality of circumspection, which is the fourth. In other words, you look at what you’re doing and you try to understand it in terms of cause and effect. When you breathe this way, what happens? When you breathe that way, what happens? Change the rhythm of the breathing. See what happens. This way you can fine-tune your meditation. At the same time, you’re developing the most important insights there are, insights into cause and effect. What really does cause suffering? What puts an end to suffering? The Four Noble Truths are about cause and effect. Skillful causes, desirable effects. Unskillful causes, undesirable effects. This is where you see it happening, right here, right now, in the way you breathe. It’s amazing how much the breath can do for us and yet how little we normally explore it. For most people, the breath is just what keeps them alive, keeps life going, and that’s it. But when you really explore it, you find that the breath energy in the body has lots of ins and outs. The breath is a mirror for the mind. The mind gets affected by the breath. An insight lies in seeing the connections. It’s not simply a matter of seeing that things are impermanent or inconstant or stressful in itself. It’s also a matter of seeing connections. What are you doing that gives rise to inconstant things, stressful things? Things that are not self. In other words, things you just wouldn’t want to hold on to. The breath is your laboratory. You can learn these lessons by watching cause and effect and the way you adjust the breath and what that does to the mind. The new state in the mind affects the breath, and if it’s affecting it in the wrong way, you can change things again. You’re developing your powers of observation. These are the prerequisite for any kind of insight. We’re not trying to program ourselves. A lot of times you hear of meditation techniques where they just say, “Well, look at it in this way and this way is going to make you enlightened. Force your mind into a certain mold.” Well, if you could force your mind into Nirvana, everybody would have gone there a long time ago. It requires that you be very observant. That question you started out with, this bewilderment, “Why is there suffering?” comes down to what you’re doing. The purpose of the meditation is to make that very clear, put you in a position so you can see clearly what you’re doing. You’d think you would know what you’re doing all the time, but most people don’t. That’s the biggest mister in their lives, this big blind spot, and it’s so close to them, and yet it’s so blotted out by all kinds of misunderstandings and denial and ignorance of all of its shapes and forms. But as you try to use circumspection in adjusting your breath, adjusting the results, if they’re not what you want, come back and adjust them again. Work with it. Think not only of changing the length of the breath, but also the texture of the breath, making it heavier or lighter. Make it coarser or more refined, deeper or more shallow. There are lots of ways of adjusting things. You can change also the point at which you focus in your body, where the center of your awareness seems to be. It can be up in your head, down in the body. If you tend to be a head person, it’s useful to try to get it down into the body. The lower center of gravity, the center of your awareness, can’t get so easily blown away by thoughts. There are lots of different ways in which you can experiment. So you can see cause and effect happening in your own mind. This is why scientists act. They set up an experiment and then they change the variables bit by bit by bit to see what that does to the result. They see which changes make a difference and which ones don’t. You’ve got the breath here as your laboratory, and it keeps coming in and going out. It’s always there for you to observe, always there for you to adjust, if you pay attention. These are the four qualities that make for success in the meditation. Many times we don’t like the word “success” in meditation, but the Buddha didn’t mind using that word. He was perfectly open and above board about it. The meditation does take you someplace. It does make changes in the mind. If it didn’t, there wouldn’t be any purpose in doing it.

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