Bases for Success

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The whole path is a path of action. This is easy enough to understand when we’re talking about the practice of virtue, the practice of concentration. But discernment is a type of action as well. It’s a means to an end. It’s tactical. And it’s good to keep that point in mind. Sometimes we think that the whole purpose of the path is to arrive at some kind of discernment. But the discernment isn’t where you arrive. The discernment is part of where you’re walking along. The release is where we’re trying to go. Because discernment is part of the path, it’s something you do. Ultimately, it’s something you let go as well. This is why right view has to be just right. Otherwise, you don’t take a right view and hold on to it to club other people over the head. You hold on to it just to the extent that you need in order to do the work that needs to be done in your own mind, to find where the attachments are that cause suffering and to learn how to pry them loose. You have to keep this in mind as we practice. Some of the things we’re doing seem to be the exact opposite of where we want to go, but they’re the means to get us there, like the basis for success, like itibara. There’s desire, there’s persistence, there’s intentness, there’s discrimination in the sense of being discriminating in what you do and what you don’t do. Many times we’re told that some of these things are really bad. Desire is supposed to be bad for the practice. Efforting is bad, or the discriminating mind is bad. Ultimately, they’re all things that we want to get beyond, but they’re things that we have to use in our practice, learn how to use them well. Once you’ve used them well, then you can let them go. The basis of success focuses primarily on two factors of the path, right and wrong. Effort and right concentration are three of the factors, three of the basis for success. They’re tied up in right effort. You generate desire, you arouse your persistence, and you uphold your intent. Desire, persistence, intent. These are three of the elements and the basis for success. There are also three qualities that are supposed to be found in every state of concentration. There has to be a certain desire to do the concentration before you can do it. You have to like the object you’re doing and like the activity of trying to get the mind to settle down. As you’re practicing, you want to do your best in order to overcome any dislike, any disinclination you might have. You want to get the mind to settle with the breath, to settle with your meditation word, whatever the object is that you’re focused on. If you find that the mind is not settling down, just stop and ask yourself, “Okay, what is it that you don’t like about this? What do you not want to do here?” Then learn to reason with yourself. Cajole yourself. Remind yourself of all the good things that come from getting the mind to settle down. Once there’s the desire, then you have to make sure that it’s properly focused. You want to have it focused on the causes rather than on the effects. If you sit there simply thinking about how much you’d like to get the mind to be quiet, but without actually doing the work that needs to be done, the desire becomes an obstacle. So focus it on what you’re doing. Try to want to be with the breath. Try to want to catch the mind, want to get it back. Do what you can to foster this desire and foster it, focusing it on the right place. That’s how you actually get the results. The same goes with persistence. You can’t try or make an effort with Nirvana. You make an effort at the path, the various things that you’ve got to do in order to get the mind to settle down, based on that desire. There’s a passage from the Buddha that says, “All Dhammas are based in desire.” That means good Dhammas and bad Dhammas. This is one of those passages that counts Nirvana as something that’s not really a Dhamma. It’s the letting go or the ending of all Dhammas. But everything else, good or bad, skillful or unskillful, has to start with desire. Then out of that desire grows your persistence, your effort that you put into it. Keep at it. Again, the effort doesn’t have to be the kind of effort where you’re sitting there bending and sweating and wearing yourself out. It means simply learning how to stick with it each breath, each breath, each breath, each mind moment. Stay with your object. Stick with it. The third basis for success means that you pay careful attention to what you’re doing. You really stay focused. Try to be as sensitive as possible to what you’re doing. These three qualities—desire, persistence and intent—are supposed to exist in every state of concentration. The difference simply is which is more pronounced. There are some ways of concentrating that are really focused on the desire to do it. In others, the persistence, the effort that you’re putting in, becomes more prominent. In some, it’s the intent that you really are trying to stay focused on something. You get interested in it. It captures your imagination. You want to really watch what’s happening. The fourth basis of success is the one that makes all the difference. It is possible to put the mind into states of wrong concentration. In other words, concentration without any real understanding of the Four Noble Truths, without any real desire to know what’s the difference between skillful and unskillful. You work at the concentration. This is why there is such a thing as wrong concentration, the concentration that’s used in voodoo and that kind of stuff, or the concentration that’s practiced in order to make yourself better than other people. There’s a passage in the Canon where it talks about a person who gets into the first jhana and comes back up through some of the higher, formless jhanas. He comes out of the jhana thinking, “Here I am better than other people. I’ve got this jhana. They don’t have it.” He either just thinks that to himself or goes around proclaiming it to other people. That’s wrong concentration. As the Buddha said, it’s the concentration of a person with no integrity, of no real, genuine goodness. Because I’m not using the concentration. I’m using it for the right purpose, which is to put an end to their own defilements, to see their own stupidity. That’s what it comes down to. The reason we suffer is because we’re stupid about certain things. We may be very wise, very well-educated in some areas, but we’re really stupid about the issue of suffering, exactly what the suffering is, why we’re suffering. That’s the Buddha’s special contribution to the practice of concentration. Concentration is this element of discrimination—concentration based on trying to see where there’s suffering and to understand how to put an end to it. The directive thought and evaluation in your first jhana is directed to noticing where there’s the slightest bit of stress, say, in the breath, in whatever your meditation object is. You evaluate that and try to do what you can to lessen the stress. The Buddha talks about going through the various levels of concentration with this question in mind. Where is there a disturbance? Where is there stress? That becomes more and more prominent as the real focus of the meditation. This is concentration based on discrimination. It means not only being very sensitive, but also analyzing things, looking for the cause, understanding what you have to do when you find the cause, i.e., how to let it go. This is what helps turn concentration into right concentration. Without this element, the concentration can get useless. Concentration can be used for all kinds of other things—good, bad, indifferent. Concentration is a neutral thing, just like mindfulness is a neutral thing. It can be used for good or bad purposes. But the element of discrimination here is the one that helps make sure that you’re using your concentration for the right things, for the right goals, for the right purposes. It’s reminding yourself that even though you may have attained a very strong level of concentration, it’s really not worth that much until you apply it to this particular issue, the issue that wants to see why they’re suffering, where they’re suffering, what can be done about it. As for the level that you have, you don’t want to go around talking about it to other people, because it’s really not any of their business. Your suffering is your own business. It’s your own stupidity. It’s your own lack of understanding. So for success in the practice, it’s good to have all four elements. The first three are supposed to be, as I said, in every state of concentration. There has to be some desire. There has to be some persistence. There has to be the intent, focused. In order to get the mind into concentration to begin with, you have to make sure you have all those elements. As I said, one may be predominant, but you need all three. Then try to make sure that you also add the element of discrimination, the ability to step back from whatever you’ve got and look at it. Even in this state of concentration, where is there still stress? When you leave concentration, try to use your awareness. Improve stillness of mind. In other words, don’t really leave totally. When you come out, try to maintain as much contact as you can with the breath. This is part of the persistence, but it also forms the basis for your ability to look at what’s going on. When the mind goes out to an object, how does it go out? When there’s a lapse of mindfulness, what presages the lapse of mindfulness? What tells you in advance, “Here, watch out, something’s going to happen”? What choices does the mind make? You want to use your concentration to observe what’s going on. That’s the kind of concentration that leads to awakening, that goes beyond just the path or takes the path to its desired goal. So this is the skillful use of your powers of discrimination. The word “discrimination” has a lot of bad meanings as well. Discrimination based on race, gender, whatever, because that’s not really discriminating discrimination. It’s dumb discrimination, thoughtless discrimination. Here we want to use wise discrimination. So the powers of our mind really do become an aid in the practice and not just a pile of theories that we carry around in our heads. We want to be discriminating about what you do and discriminating about the results that you get. That’s how we really succeed in the meditation.

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