The Bases of Success

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The Buddha lists four ways that concentration can gain strength, or four qualities of mind that can form a foundation for concentration. They’re called the basis for success. And the usual list is desire, persistence, intent, and discovery. Discrimination here meaning your ability to make distinctions, to analyze things, think them through. But the formula is actually longer than that. For example, with desire, it’s concentration founded on desire together with the fabrications of exertion. The fabrications of exertion being basically the four types of right effort. To abandon what’s unskillful and develop what’s skillful. If something has not yet arisen that’s unskillful, you’re deprived of it. If something that has already arisen that is skillful, you try to bring it to the culmination of its development. In other words, it’s not just brute desire. Even the desire here has to be tempered by some understanding of what’s skillful and what’s not. There’s a similar formula for each of the other basis for success or the basis for power. It’s concentration founded on persistence together with the fabrications of exertion, concentration founded on intent and the fabrications of exertion, and concentration founded on discrimination and the fabrications of exertion. You find that each of them leads to a different quality of concentration. There’s one sense in which every state of concentration has to have some of these qualities, or has all of these qualities to some extent, but one may be dominant. In other words, you really like the object of your meditation and you just stay focused right on it. You want very much to get concentration, so you stay focused. That’s concentration founded on desire. It tends to be more focused and involve a fair amount of willpower. Similarly, with persistence, just sticking with it, sticking with it, sticking with it, whatever the object is that you’re focused on. Of course, it’s hard to have persistence without desire. So again, this is more of a willpower kind of concentration. And then there’s intent, where you pay very careful attention to what you’re doing. This goes beyond simple willpower. You have to be observant. You have to give the object your full attention. This is where the concentration begins to morph into something just more than the willpower. You have to develop care in how you’re focused. And then finally, there’s discrimination. This is the concentration that’s based on figuring things out. In other words, there are certain problems the mind has in understanding. It won’t be willing to settle down until it understands. This is where you have to start using your wisdom, your understanding, your powers of analysis, to get the mind to settle down. For instance, with the breath. Some people just simply like being with the breath and they go right for it. They can settle down without much analysis. And other people, before they can settle down, run into that problem, “Well, exactly what is the breath?” When John Lee is talking about breath sensations in the body, what are those? And how do you know when they’re flowing well? How do you know it’s not just a figment of your imagination? Or if they’re not flowing well, what can you do to make them flow better? At the beginning, it seems like a lot of activity, a lot of thinking. It’s not very quiet at all. But if the mind can have its imagination captured by the breath, at the very least you’re not thinking about anything else. You’re right here with the breath, thinking about this, trying that, analyzing it from this side and that side. And when you finally do come to an understanding, the mind is willing to just settle down and simply be with the breath. So there are different ways you can settle down—some involving more willpower and others involving more analysis. The quality of the concentration will be different. Sometimes if your concentration is based simply on desire or persistence, it’ll be very hard to settle down. Dvarañjana Vana calls this lifting the mind above its object. In other words, pulling out of the concentration just enough so you can see what’s going on in it, not so far away that you’ve destroyed it. That requires a certain amount of discrimination, a certain amount of discernment. There are advantages and drawbacks to both kinds. The concentration that’s founded on desire and persistence has a strength and a solidity that sometimes is missing from the concentration founded on discrimination. But the problem with that concentration founded on desire is that it just stays right there. It’s like it’s been plugged into the object. And either it’s in or it’s not in—the object not in or not in concentration. It takes the mind a while to find the balance. As for the concentration founded on discrimination, it’s not quite as solid, but it is a concentration that’s got the balance needed for insight. And it’s not the case that one person will have only one kind of concentration. You’ll find your desire to practice is really strong. Your desire to settle down is really strong. This is especially true when you’ve come from a difficult day. You’re feeling all frazzled and you don’t even want to think about anything. You just want to settle right in. Wrap yourself up in the concentration like a person wrapped up in a big blanket and not go anywhere at all. Other days, the mind is not willing to settle down unless something captures its imagination. This might be the issue, say, of pain in the body. You’re hoping to settle down, have a nice, quiet sit, and pain gets in the way. So you’ve got to figure out, “How can I settle down here and not get absorbed in the pain, or not get pulled into the pain?” Then you can start to think about the way the breath relates to the pain and how some ways of breathing aggravate the pain. It helps to soothe the pain. Or you may find that one part of the body seems to be really lacking in breath energy. It might be right in the middle of the head. You’ve been thinking a lot. Then it’s time to give that part of the body some nourishment. So when you can figure out exactly what the problem is and the mind is willing to settle down, what kind of breath is going to bring things into balance? After you’ve analyzed the issue, you can settle in. Some people find that working with the three characteristics, or the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, actually means for concentration. And the Buddha says as much. There’s one passage where he says that a person can go off and think in terms of not-self, not-self, not-self, but it can actually take you to that dimension of nothingness. This is an important point to keep in mind. Some people think that if you hold that perception in mind, then whatever happens to the mind is the result of vipassana, or insight. It’s going to take you right to liberation. But the Buddha said, “No, sometimes it can take you to a very refined state of concentration, and then you just stay right there.” It’s just that the perception itself does not necessarily guarantee liberating insight. It can help bring the mind to a state of concentration, and it is a certain amount of insight there, realizing that the form of the body is not-yourself, and the feelings and perceptions, all the aggregates, are not-self. And sometimes the mind’s reaction is just to let go of these things for a while, but it goes to a very subtle state of equanimity. There’s a strong sense of nothing happening. That’s a state of concentration. So there’s a concentration that comes from thinking your way through things and analyzing things, and then there’s a concentration that comes from force of will, and then there’s a concentration that comes from the combination of the two. And it’s good to be able to meditate on that. There’ll be times when you’ve been thinking so much during the day that the idea of thinking your way in meditation doesn’t appeal at all. You just want to get right to the point and just stay right there, which is perfectly fine. The concentration practice is here to bring things into balance and to heal the illnesses of the body, heal the illnesses of the mind. It’s not just one tonic that’s going to be good for everything. So you recognize when a certain type is appropriate, and remember that there are these various types. That right there is an important aid to the practice. Remember, you can approach the issue of concentration from many angles, and they’re all valid. you

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