Bases of Success

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You’ve gone to the market, you’ve bought a coconut, and you’re carrying it home. Someone comes up and asks you, “What are you going to do with the coconut?” And you say, “I’m going to make a curry out of it.” Are you going to make a curry out of the husk? No. Then why are you carrying the husk? At that point, Ajahn Chah says, “How are you going to answer this person?” And right here he says something interesting. He says, “You answer with desire. You have to want to come up with a good answer so that you have the discernment to answer correctly.” Of course, the answer is that the time hasn’t come yet to get rid of the husk. You need the husk to get the coconut flesh back. Once you’ve got it back, then you can remove the flesh from the husk and throw the husk away. And it’s the same with our practice. There are certain things that we have to hold on to as part of the path that eventually we’ll let go of. And people will come up and say, “Why are you holding on to samadhi? Why are you holding on to your precepts? Why are you holding on to whatever?” And the way you answer, of course, is with desire. Desire is one of the things you’ve got to hold on to that eventually you’ll let go of. This applies in particular to the qualities that are needed to succeed at meditation. Meditation is a skill, and we want to succeed at it. It’s not simply a matter of just accepting or being with whatever is there. We have certain qualities we’ve got to develop, and we have to develop them with skill. Otherwise they won’t take us to where we want to go. There are four altogether, as the Buddha calls them. There’s concentration that’s based on desire and the fabrications of exertion. There’s concentration based on persistence and the fabrications of exertion. There’s concentration based on intent. And then there’s concentration based on your powers of discrimination and the fabrications of exertion. That phrase “fabrications of exertion” basically comes down to the fact that there are times when you really have to make an effort—bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, mental fabrication—to get past the things that are going to be in the way of your concentration. In other words, if a problem comes up, the first course of expression is, “Well, how’s the breath?” That’s your bodily fabrication. Is there some way you can improve the way you’re breathing around this issue? Then there’s verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation, how you’re thinking about it. How do you frame the issues to yourself? And what are you thinking about? Sometimes your thoughts are eating away at your concentration. You feel, “I’m not capable of doing this. I’m a miserable meditator.” Put that kind of thinking aside. It may be there in your mind, but you don’t have to get involved with it. How do you put these things aside? Well, just that. They may be reverberating around or ricocheting around in your head, but you don’t have to take them on. You don’t have to claim them as yours. You don’t have to agree with them. So even though they may continue on just out of the force of momentum, you can get back to your breath and start again. Start thinking about what’s going on with the breath. Is the breath good? Is the breath bad? Apply some verbal fabrication to improve your bodily fabrication. And then there’s mental fabrication, which are your feelings and perceptions. What kind of feelings are you getting out of the breath right now? What kind of feelings are you getting in the mind? Feelings here, of course, meaning feeling tones. And what are the perceptions that are holding all this together? How do you visualize the breath? How do you perceive the movement of breath energy in the body? Can you change those perceptions so that they allow the breath to flow more freely? All of these things are called the fabrications of exertion. Sometimes the Buddha switches the terms around. It’s the exertion of fabrications. The important thing is that there’s effort that needs to be done. And it’s motivated by the combination of these four qualities, which also are related directly to right effort. The phrase for right effort is that you generate desire, you exert a persistence, you uphold your intent. You’ve got three of the motivating factors right there. Then you try to abandon any unskillful qualities that have arisen in practice. You try to prevent unskillful qualities that haven’t yet arisen from arising. You try to give rise to skillful qualities and then maintain them and develop them. That part requires your powers of discernment to figure out what’s skillful and what’s not, and how you can get them to do what you want. So these four bases for success are very closely related to right effort. And if things aren’t going well in your meditation, you might ask yourself which of the four qualities is missing. The first one is desire. As the Buddha said, you want the desire not to be too strong or too weak. If it’s too strong, all you can think about is how much you want things to settle down, and just wanting is not going to do it. And if you don’t want anything at all, that’s not going to happen either. The way to get the power of your desire just right is to focus not so much on the effects that you want, but focus on the causes. Give yourself pep talks so that you want to do what’s required to get the mind to settle down. If that means staying with the breath, okay, figure out how you can want to stay with the breath. This, of course, requires some of your powers of discrimination to figure out what would be a good tactic to do here. It’s not the case that you have just one of these bases for success. That’s going to take you a while. You have to use a mixture of them. So you have to use some wisdom with your wanting to figure out how you stick with it in a way that really gives results. So whatever your topic of meditation, learn how to like it. Learn how to want to be with it. And that can take care of a lot of problems right there. The next one is persistence. How do you stick with it? Because what we’re doing here is not a hundred-yard dash. It’s a marathon. So how do you pace yourself? What level of energy can you put into it? The Buddha talks about this as being like tuning a musical instrument. You want to get the level of energy just right. But it has to be just right not only for what you’re capable of, but also for whatever’s required by the particular problem. Some problems require that you be very, very patient and very still because they’re delicate. If you go barging in, you destroy them. It’s like a very delicate instrument. If you move it around too roughly, then you’re not going to get the results you want. So a very delicate instrument. A very fine thread that’s tangled, you have to be very delicate with it. Some of the problems in the mind are like that. Another problem is that, in the Mahābhūva’s phrase, there’s like a big pile of excrement. All you need is a big bucket of water to wash them out. There are those as well. So you’ve got to figure out what’s just right for the persistence. Intent means being very careful to notice what’s actually going on, really focusing on what’s happening, giving it your full attention, and not just going through the motions. You can sit here with the breath coming in, going out, coming in, going out, and then it gets on to automatic pilot and then the mind is off someplace else. You really want to be fully sensitive to the breath. Open up your whole body to the breathing. Open up your whole mind, your whole awareness, to the breathing. Think of the breath as being something that fills the whole range of your awareness. If your awareness goes beyond the body, think of the breath going beyond the body as well. Everything is filled with breath. After all, there’s a cocoon of breath energy running around your body, too. Take that into consideration. Think of yourself being surrounded on all sides, behind you, above you, below you. It’s all breath. And give your full attention to what you can do to see what’s happening. That’s when you bring in the fourth quality. The Pali term vimamsa means discrimination. Ajaan-li has a nice translation, which is circumspection. This is a quality that all the ajaans talk about. It’s that when you’re focusing on your object, you have to be all around in your gaze. So you’re noticing not only the object but also your mind. How is your mind relating to the object? When something happens in your meditation, how does your mind react? If something good happens, how does it react? If something upsetting happens, discouraging, how do you react? Don’t let the mind get knocked off course. Be circumspect about what you’re doing. Look all around. Another way of translating this quality is your ingenuity. You’ve got to use your ingenuity to figure out if something’s not going well. What can you do to change the situation? You can get techniques and strategies from the books or from Dhamma talks, but sometimes you’ve got to cook up your own. It’s like going into the kitchen. You’ve got all these great cookbooks, but you look in the refrigerator, you look in the pantry, and you don’t have all the ingredients for any of the recipes. But you do have some ingredients. So what do you do? You’ve learned your basic cooking techniques and you’ve got some ideas of how you might try something new this time, putting something together. That’s not in any book, but it can still turn out fine. That’s the quality of ingenuity you want to bring to your meditation. You may find that your concentration isn’t as strong as you want it to be. What’s going on? What have you got here? What can you do to make yourself more interested in the breath, happier to be here, more alert to what’s going on, see what you can come up with? It’s in this way that the meditation becomes yours, the skill becomes yours as well. And that’s when your meditation can succeed.

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