Use Your Imagination

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There are four qualities the Buddha said can help lead the mind to concentration. He calls them the basis of success. And the name right there tells you something, that meditation is something that you can do either well or not well. So how do you do it well? The first basis is desire. The second is persistence. The third is intent. And the fourth is using your powers of analysis. In each case, you want to adjust the qualities so they’re just right. In other words, desire, when it’s just right, is focused not so much on the results, it’s focused on the causes. You tell yourself, “I want to stay with the breath.” And then ask yourself, “How am I going to do that?” But first you want to make sure that your desire is strong enough so that every time you fall off, you come right back. You fall off again, you come right back again. That leads to the second quality, which is persistence. It can also be translated as effort or energy. And here again, the quality has to be just right. One, just right for the task at hand. And two, just right for your level of energy right now. You probably know this sutta where the Buddha comes to see a monk who’s been doing walking meditation to the point where his feet are bleeding. He’s getting ready to give up on the practice entirely. The Buddha gave the image of the time when the monk was a layperson and he played the lute. When the strings of the lute were too tight, the lute didn’t sound right. When they were too loose, it didn’t sound right. It had to be just right. In the same way, apparently the lute of those days had five strings. So in the same way, he said, first you adjust one string, i.e., your level of energy, and then you adjust the other ones to that. Your conviction, your mindfulness, concentration, discernment. So when you’re sitting down and you’ve got lots of energy, you tell yourself, “I’m going to do a lot more.” When the energy is low, you satisfy yourself with just getting through the hour. In other words, you make your expectations, your conviction of what you can do, in line with what your capabilities are right now. Don’t get frustrated when you can’t do everything that’s described in the texts or in the books. But keep watch over your level of energy to figure out what you can expect out of yourself tonight. The intent is when you pay careful attention to what you’re doing. You keep an eye on the mind, you keep an eye on the breath. In John Lee’s images of a rope that goes over a pulley, sometimes you pull it in one direction, sometimes you pull it in the other direction. In other words, you check with the mind, you check with the breath, then you come back and you check the mind again. In order to give a sense of oneness to the concentration, you want to bring the mind together with the breath, so you can watch them both at the same time. Pay careful attention. When people complain that they’re getting bored or hitting a plateau in their meditation, usually it’s because they’re not paying careful attention to what they’re doing. Then finally, use your powers of analysis. If things are not going well, ask yourself what the problem might be. And then try out different ways of dealing with things. The Buddha talks about those three types of fabrication—the breath, directed thought and evaluation, and feelings and perceptions. So those are the things you want to look at. Is there a problem with the breath? If you changed the way you breathed, what would happen? Experiment. See what happens. Use your powers of judgment. Is there a problem with the way you’re talking to yourself? When you focus on the breath, where are you focusing on it? And what are you telling yourself about the breath? And what are you telling yourself about your meditation? Sometimes the commentary on the meditation actually destroys the concentration. Either you’re too indulgent with yourself or you’re too strict. And sometimes you’re just not asking the right questions. So the Buddha gives you a framework for asking the questions. What are you doing in terms of the breath? How are you talking to yourself? And which voices are you picking up in the mind? You have a lot of choices, you know. You’ll hear these random voices coming through, random thoughts coming through. And you have to make up your mind you’re going to stay with the commentary on how is the breath going, how is the mind staying with the breath, and commentaries that veer off in other directions and how to put them aside. And finally, feelings and perceptions. What feelings are you focusing on? There’s often a tendency, when there’s a pain in the body, you focus on the pains and then you use the painful parts of the body to do the breathing, which just makes things worse. Actually, they’re the ones who should be getting a vacation. They’re the ones who should be given the breath. Let other parts do the work. So find the parts that are comfortable. Focus your attention there and have them do the work. As for perceptions, what kind of perception of the breath are you holding in mind? Breath coming in, breath going out. Where does it start? Where does it end? What is the breath? How do you picture it to yourself? Maybe the way you picture it to yourself can help. Get the mind in concentration, or it can get in the way. So be careful about what kinds of pictures of the breath you hold in mind. What pictures about where you are, what you’re doing. These all come under mental fabrication. So these are some of the ways in which you look after your concentration and develop it so you can actually succeed in getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being, with a sense of belonging here. And as for your job, judgment as to how well you might expect, well, that gets back to your level of energy right now. If your energy is down, content yourself with just staying with the breath, not expecting too much out of it, but realizing that by holding on to the breath you’re keeping the mind from going off and indulging in other, more harmful ways of thinking. And also counsel yourself, this is what the direct thought comes in. Counsel yourself to be patient. Often people meditate for a little bit, they don’t see the results, they get upset. Then they start turning on themselves or turning on the Dhamma, which doesn’t help anything at all. In Thailand, the image they give is of farmers. Farmers plant the rice seeds, and then they know it’s going to take time. The little tiny plants come up, but they don’t pull on the plants to make them taller. If they were to do that, of course, the plants would get uprooted and that would kill them. So you let the plants do the growing and you do the nurturing, with the realization that sometimes the results will come quickly and sometimes not. So it sounds like a lot of mental work in order to get the mind to settle down. And it is, because the mind is usually running off in all sorts of directions and has lots of tricks. So you’re going to need a lot of techniques for dealing with the potential tricks that come up. It’s not that you’re going to be using all four at the same time. But figure out which one is lacking and work on it. Ultimately, of course, they all will begin to work together. It’s interesting that people have done research into imagination. They’ve noticed that there are four qualities to using your imagination in a productive way. In other words, not just sitting there creating worlds in the mind, but actually thinking of ways of doing things in a more effective way. And the same four qualities come in. Desire. You generate the desire. In other words, you have to generate a picture in the mind. And then you hold it there. That’s the persistence. You pay careful attention to it. Then you adjust it and then judge the adjustments. This way you start out with a very rough picture in the mind and you can work on it and make it more detailed, more effective. You run tests on it and then judge the results of the tests. Well, it’s the same with the concentration. You test different ways of breathing, test different ways of thinking about the breath, focusing on the breath. And keep at it, keep at it. This way the mind gets exercised in a way that helps prepare it for giving rise to discernment. Because that ability to judge the results of your actions, that’s what discernment is all about. It’s a value judgment. When you do things, are they worth doing? That’s what it all comes down to. We look for happiness in our actions and all too often we create suffering. So we have to ask ourselves, “What are we doing? Why are we doing it? When we want happiness, why would we act in a way that’s creating suffering?” Well, it’s out of ignorance. We’re not paying careful attention to what we’re doing or to the results. We’re not connecting the two. So we’ve got to learn how to connect the two. And concentration gives you good practice in that. You work on the mind and you look at the results. You work on the breath and you look at the results. And you keep at it, keep at it. Learn how to be patient but persistent at the same time. And as part of your imagination, imagine that you can do this all too often. We had the feeling beforehand, “I’m going to be a failure.” Of course, that sets you up for failure. Remind yourself this is something that can be done, something human beings can do. If human beings couldn’t do it, the Buddha wouldn’t have taught it. So allow yourself to imagine, “Yes, I can do this.” We read stories of people in the past who’ve meditated while they were sick. “Yes, I can do this. They can do it. Why can’t I?” That’s the attitude you’ve got to have. It’s thinking of that as a possibility that allows you to generate the desire you need in order to get the mind into concentration. If you think it’s impossible, then you won’t even want to try. Or you’ll try for a little bit and give up. But you’ve got to remind yourself this is possible. This can be done. And you’re capable of doing it. As you hold that possibility in mind, then you adjust it to what you’re doing right now, to move what you’re doing right now in that direction. That’s how your imagination is one of the bases of power, the basis of success. And as you exercise it here, you find you can use it in other areas of life as well. But right here is where it gives its best results. Because there’s no other skill out there that can promise to put an end to suffering. But this one does. And many, many people have testified that, yes, it does. It does deliver the results. So imagine that you can be one of those people. Even though you’re just getting started, or you’re tired, it’s been a long day, imagine you can do this well. You can get something out of this. It may not be everything you’ve read about in the books, but at least you’re going to benefit as you keep at it, keep at it. Put some room in your imagination for that. And the meditation will be sure to succeed.

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