Bases of Success

November 17, 2022

Toward the end of his life, the Buddha listed seven lists of Dhammas that he said were his most important teachings. Now, out of the seven lists, there’s one that hardly ever gets mentioned in Western Dhamma. That’s the basis of success. It may be because the word success here can also mean psychic power. People shy away from the idea of psychic powers. But it’s basically how you succeed in concentration practice. And of the four qualities that the Buddha lists, three of them tend to be derided in Western practice. There’s desire, persistence, intent, using your powers of analysis. Sometimes we’re told desire is bad on the path. Sometimes we’re told that efforting is bad on the path. Or that we shouldn’t analyze things, just be with whatever is coming up. But if you really want to get the mind to settle down, you want to succeed in the practice, you’ve got to develop these four qualities. In fact, they’re so basic to any effort that in Thailand, this is actually one of the four qualities that’s most mentioned. In relationship, not only to concentration practice, but to success in any area of life. So as you’re sitting here practicing, things seem to be going nowhere. You can ask yourself, which of the four qualities you’re lacking, and how can you make up the lack? The first is desire. Now, desire can get in the way when it’s focused on how much you want the results of the practice. But it’s actually necessary. Focus it on the causes. What’s going to get you there? And if you do the causes right, and have the desire to do the causes right, then the results are going to have to come. So how do you generate desire? The right kind of desire. And the left kind of desire. And the left kind of desire. You don’t even think of a good analogy for how quick it is. The flash of an eye is still too slow. That’s a scary thought. You’re practicing the Dharma, and something can happen. Maybe you encounter pain, or you encounter grief that your practice doesn’t seem to be able to handle. And you think there’s something wrong with the practice as a whole. You change direction. That’s a danger in the mind. It’s so quick to turn on itself. However, you also realize that heedfulness means that if you train the mind properly, you can get past those dangers. If there were just the danger, and you couldn’t train, and you couldn’t make a difference, then heedfulness wouldn’t mean anything. Heedfulness is the quality that when you go out in the forest, you prepare for dangers. Because you know that your ability to survive the dangers is going to depend an awful lot on your response to dangers, your preparation. So your actions really do make a difference. That’s what heedfulness is all about. There is a kind of fear there, the fear of the dangers, but there’s also a confidence that those dangers can be overcome. I was born in Greenland. They wanted to prove that all the Inuits across the north coast of Canada and into Alaska were basically the same culture as the ones in Greenland. So they took a couple of other Inuits, and they went on dog sleds, and they crossed over northern Canada. They kept finding tribe after tribe, village after village. And they realized they really were all the same culture. He was most interested in the tribe’s beliefs. It happened at least twice when he asked the shaman in different villages, what are your religious beliefs? And they said, we don’t believe, we’re fear. That’s the motivation. There’s so much out there to fear that we have to prepare for. And the Buddha actually is in line with the Inuits on that one. There’s a lot to fear. But the fear can be used in a skillful way to motivate yourself to practice. You see the dangers, but you realize the dangers can be overcome. Once you have the proper motivation, then the next base for success is persistence. You stick with the practice. And you stick with it again, and you keep sticking with it. Again, focusing step by step by step in what you’re doing. Not impatience. But being patient doesn’t mean you simply let things happen on their own. You stick with the job. Step, step, step again. Focus on what you’re doing right now. Each breath as it’s coming in, each breath as it’s going out. If you get impatient, you can ruin things. This is one of the reasons why the Ajahn’s never said, think about how much longer it’s going to be to follow this path. If they find the students are thinking about that, then the response is, well, think how much longer it’s going to be if you don’t follow this path. If we don’t follow the path, samsara is endless. It’s a process that can just keep on going, going, going. Whereas the path has an end. It can arrive at closure. It can arrive at a conclusion. And where is the goal to be found? It’s found in doing the duties of the path. So you focus on those. Keeping track of the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. You do that. You keep track of the path. Any other thoughts? Any thoughts that come up related to the world, you put them aside. And you develop these qualities of mindfulness, ardency, and alertness. Mindfulness is keeping in mind the lessons you’ve learned as they apply to what you’re doing right now. Alertness is to watching what you’re actually doing. Then ardency is trying to do it right. Noticing if you’re not getting good at something, not getting good results, okay, what might you be doing wrong? When Ajahn Lee discusses these three qualities, the ardency is the one that he identifies with wisdom and discernment. In other words, you learn lessons. You watch what you’re doing. You don’t just sit there. That’s not wise. You don’t just say, well, things are like this, or this is the way things are. The present moment has potentials. It’s not a given. And you want to develop those potentials in the right direction. Seeing that it has these potentials, that’s ardency, and that’s what’s wise in the practice. Third base of success is intent. You really focus your full attention on what you’re doing. You pay careful attention. You don’t just go through the motions. And then finally, the fourth one, as I said, is you’re using your powers of analysis. Think of all the powers of analysis the mind has. The word wimangsa in Pali has lots of meanings. It can mean ingenuity. It can mean analysis. It’s using your powers of discrimination. Discrimination in the positive sense of the word. In other words, seeing what’s wrong. What’s right, what’s wrong, what’s going on. And then figuring out what to do. And then trying it. And then paying full attention again to what you’re doing. Seeing what results you’re getting. And then reflecting on them again. There’s a passage where the Buddha says the Dharma is nourished by two activities. One is commitment, and the other is reflection. The desire, the persistence, and the intent. That’s all commitment. The power of some analysis. That’s reflection. Because discernment comes not only from reading Dharma books and listening to the Dharma, or even just thinking about the Dharma. You take what you’ve read, you take what you’ve thought about, until it makes sense. And then you put it into practice. And then in putting it into practice, you learn a lot. It’s like developing any physical skill or manual skill. You can learn all about the theory. But you really don’t have a full sense of what that skill can do until you’ve taken the theory and you’ve put it into practice. That’s how your discernment grows. So when you look at your own practice, remember this is how success comes about. You develop your desire. You develop your persistence. Your intent. And using your powers of analysis. You need the whole set. Sometimes when we think about being heedful, and there’s a fear. If I don’t practice fast enough, things can happen pretty suddenly and pretty bad. But heedfulness doesn’t mean that you’re impatient. It means that you realize that this is a skill you have to develop. It requires that you do it carefully. And reflect. Do it carefully some more and reflect. It’s like those prison break movies, where the prisoners very patiently dig their little hole and make all the preparations to make sure that the guards are not paying attention. And they prepare everything. They think through everything. And they’re very patient about whatever happens. And it takes them a long time, but they get out. As opposed to the ones who just try to force their way out without thinking. They never get out. So remember, heedfulness does not mean impatience. It means realizing there are dangers. But to get past the dangers, you’re going to require some skills. And those skills will require persistence and intent. And using your powers of analysis. Using your ingenuity and figuring out the things you don’t know yet. Being ingenious and noticing that there’s a problem in what you’re doing. And thinking about what might be the solution. After all, that’s how the Buddha himself gained awakening. He found this was not working. And the question is, what else might work? He tried something else. That didn’t work. What else might work? And finally the solution came to him. He had to test it. But it was his desire for freedom that kept him going. His desire in its own was not going to be enough. It had to be nurtured with persistence, intent, and careful observation. And these are all qualities that we can develop too. So then your practice doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. It seems to be going too slowly. Ask yourself, okay, what’s missing? Ask yourself, what’s missing? Ask yourself, what’s missing?

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