

Bases for Success

October 11, 2007

The whole path is a path of action. This is easy enough to understand when we're talking about the practice of virtue and 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. Discernment is part of where you're walking along. The release is where we're trying to go. And because discernment is part of the path, it's something you do, and ultimately it's something you let go of as well.

This is why right view has to be just right. In other words, 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 it 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.

So we have to keep this in mind as we practice, because some of the things we're doing seem to be exact opposite of where we want to go, but they are the means to get us there. Like the bases for success, *iddhipada*: desire, persistence, intentness, and discrimination, in the sense of being discriminating as to what to do and what not to do. Often we're told that some of these things are really bad. Desires must be bad for the practice. Some people tell us that efforting is bad, or that the discriminating mind is bad. Now, ultimately these are all things we want to get beyond, but they're things we have to use in our practice, and to learn how use them well. Once you use them well, then you can let them go.

The bases of success focused primarily on two factors of the path: right effort and right concentration. Three of the bases for success are tied up in right effort, in which you generate desire, you arouse your persistence, and you uphold your intent. Desire, persistence, and intent: These are three of the base for success, or three of the elements in the bases for success. They're also three qualities that are supposed to be found in every state of concentration.

There has to be certain desire to do the concentration before you do it. You have to like the object you're doing, and like the activity of trying to get the mind to settle down.

So as you're practicing, you want to do your best to overcome any dislike, any disinclination you might have to get the mind to settle with the breath, to settle with the meditation word, whatever the object is that you're focused on. If the

mind is not settling down, stop and ask yourself: What is it that you don't like about this? Why do you not want to be here? Then learn to reason with yourself, cajole yourself, remind yourself of all the good things that come with getting the mind to settle down.

Once there's the desire, then you have to make sure it's properly focused. You want it to be 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 quiet but without actually doing the work that needs to be done, the desire becomes an obstacle. So focus in on what you're doing. Try to want to be with the breath, try to want to catch the mind, to want to get it back. Do what you can to foster this desire and foster it to be focusing in on the right place. That's how you actually get results.

The same goes with persistence. You can't try to make an effort at nibbāna. You make an effort at the path, the various things you've got to do in order to get the mind to settle down based on that desire. There's a passage where the Buddha says that all dhammas are based on desire. That means good dhammas and bad dhammas. This is one of those passages that counts nibbana as not really a dhamma. It's the letting go, 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, the effort you put into the practice, to keep at it. Again, the effort doesn't have to be the kind where you're sitting there straining and sweating and wearing yourself out. It means simply learning how to stick with each breath, each breath, each breath, each mind moment. Stay with your object. Stick with it.

The third base for success is to pay careful attention to what you're doing. You're really intent on staying focused, trying 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. They differ simply as to which is most pronounced. In some cases, concentration is really focused on the desire to do it. In others, the persistence, the effort that you put into it becomes more prominent. And in some cases, it's the intent, that you're really 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 base of success, though, is the one that makes all the difference. After all, 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 the difference between what's skillful and what's not. You just want the concentration, so you work at the concentration. This is

why there is such a thing as wrong concentration: the concentration used in voodoo, for example—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 that talks about a person who gets into the first jhana all the way up through some of the higher formless jhanas, and comes out of the jhanas thinking, "Here I'm better than other people. I've got this jhāna; they don't have it." Sometimes he not only just thinks to himself, he goes around proclaiming it to other people. That's wrong concentration. As the Buddha said, it's the concentration of a person of no integrity, of no real genuine goodness, because he's not using the concentration for the right purpose, which is to put an end to his own defilements, to see his 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.

So that's the Buddha's special contribution to the practice of concentration, the element of discrimination: concentration based on trying to see where there's suffering and to understand how to put an end to it.

In this kind of concentration, the directed thought and evaluation in the first jhāna are directed to noticing where there's the slightest bit of stress, say, in the breath, in your 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 any disturbance? Where is there stress?" It becomes more and more prominent as the real focus of the meditation or the concentration is based on discrimination. It means not only be 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 helps turn concentration into right concentration. Without this element, the concentration can get used for all kinds of other things: good, bad, indifferent. After all, concentration is a neutral thing, just as mindfulness is a neutral thing. Either can be used for good or bad purposes. But the element of discrimination here is what helps make sure that you use your concentration for the right things, for the right goals, for the right purposes.

Remind yourself that even though you may have attained a very strong state of concentration, it's really not worth much until you apply it to this particular issue: why there's suffering, where there's suffering, what can be done about it. As for the level of concentration you have, you don't want to go around bragging about

it to other people. because it's not any of their business, because your suffering is your own business: It's your own stupidity, your lack of understanding.

So for success in the practice, it's good to be good at all four bases for success. The first three, as I said, are supposed to be in every state of concentration. There has to be some desire, there has to be some persistence, there has to be the focused intent in order to get the mind into concentration to begin with. Make sure you have all those elements. As I said, one may be predominant, but you need all three.

Then make sure that you also add the element of discrimination, the ability to step back from whatever you've got, to look at it and see: Even in this state of concentration, where is there still stress? Or when you leave concentration, try to use your improved stillness of mind. In other words, don't 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? Or when there's a lapse of mindfulness, what presages the lapse of mindfulness, tells you to look here, to watch out, something is 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. It goes beyond just the path, or rather, it takes the path to its desired goal.

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 that the powers of the mind really do become an aid in the practice rather than being just a pile of theories that we carry around as a load in our heads. You want to be discriminating about what you do, and discriminating about the results you get. That's how you can really succeed in the meditation.