

Success with Breathing

November 11, 2021

In one of the lists of teachings that the Buddha said was most important to remember, he listed four qualities for succeeding at concentration. There's desire: You have to want to do it. There's persistence: You put in effort. You do your best. There's intentness, where you really give it your whole heart. You pay full attention, try your best. Then finally, there's *vimansa*, which is a word that's hard to translate. It means "discriminating," not in a bad sense, but in a good sense: making distinctions, using your powers of ingenuity, using your powers of analysis, taking a problem-solving approach. Because this list is called the basis for success, in Thailand it's also applied to other activities as well, not just concentration practice. In fact, it's applied to succeeding at anything in life. To succeed at work, to succeed in your education, you need these four qualities: desire, persistence, intentness, and your powers of analysis.

So as you approach the meditation, it's good to think of other areas of your life where you've used these qualities in the past. You may not have been thinking consciously of them, but reflect back on your work, reflect back on your manual and artistic skills to see how you actually have used these qualities.

For example, with desire, you know from experience that if you simply want the results, they're not going to happen. You have to focus your desire on the causes, trying to pay attention to what will actually lead to the results you want.

Then you stick with it. Anything that gets in the way of what you want to do, you try to abandon it. Anything that's going to help, you try to develop it.

Intentness: You pay careful attention to what you're doing. You don't just go through the motions.

And then you look at the results. If they don't come out well, what could you do to change? If they do come out well, what could you do to make them even better? That's how you succeed in your job, in your education, in skills.

Then apply those same lessons to the concentration. The difference here is that you keep finding your mind going back to areas of your life where you're already skilled, because the mind likes to deal with problems that are easy. It likes to deal with familiar issues.

When you come to the breath, you're just sitting here: You with the breath and your awareness of the breath. You hear about the descriptions of right concentration where you stay with the breath continually in such a way that gives rises to a sense of pleasure or a sense of rapture or fullness. And you don't see

where in the breath that rapture or fullness is going to be. Well, it takes time to get to know the territory. But it is important that you try to restrict the range of where you're looking. If you're going to find some happiness here, it's good to know that this is where you're going to have to find it, and you're not going to look anywhere else.

When you restrict your range here, in the beginning it may seem frustrating because you can't go back to your old thoughts. The mind will want to go back, and it probably will: to issues at work, issues at home that you're more comfortable thinking about, you're more used to thinking about, the familiar territory. You have to keep coming back, coming back to the breath, all the while reminding yourself that you have to be patient. It's going to take time to get to know this territory. But it does have potentials.

Years back, I was visiting the mother of a famous athlete, and in her den she had a huge picture of her son. At first I thought it was a very enlarged photograph. But then she explained it to me. It was a drawing made by one of his friends from school who had made some bad choices in life and ended up in jail. He had done the whole portrait out of ballpoint, just a ballpoint pen. Being in prison, he had a very restricted range of media that he could use for his artistic talent. So he got really, really good at the ballpoint pen. You can probably think of other areas in life where people have restricted means, and so they make the most of those, and do a lot more than you might have imagined. Well, it's the same with the breath.

The breath has a lot of potential. As the Buddha said, it can get the mind into a state of concentration where there's full mindfulness, full alertness, awareness filling the body. And before you get there, there's pleasure filling the body, rapture filling the body. It's all in this constricted area right here: just your awareness with a body. It does have those potentials. There are also the potentials of the mind that are applied here, where you can watch to see how the mind fashions its experiences with its perceptions, with its ways of talking to itself. You can fashion them in all kinds of ways. But you want to fashion them in a way that leads the mind to want to settle down.

These potentials are all here. Just be confident that they are, and then learn to look for them. But it's important as you're doing concentration that you do restrict yourself here. That forces you to make the most of what you've got.

Ajaan Lee has an analogy. He said we spend all our time planting seeds in other people's property, whereas our own property, even though it may not be large, gets left as weeds. Of course, when we plant something in somebody else's property, either they chase us away or they take what we've planted. We don't get much out of it. But if we turn around and make up our minds that we're going to

clear the weeds, till the soil, plant in our own property, then when the fruits arise, when the vegetables, whatever, they're going to be fully ours. So try to be consistently right here.

This quality of consistency is also important, together with patience, because you will find there is a tendency for the mind to want to squeeze something really unusual out of what you've got right here, right now.

You have to remember you want to get the mind at normalcy. That's when you see things in an undistorted way. Otherwise, it's looking at the funny mirrors in a funny house where they're convex, concave, or wavy. You'll see some details of your face that you wouldn't have noticed otherwise, but everything is distorted and out of proportion.

So this requires a gentle touch. You want a flat mirror. Just learn how to be very, very sensitive to the variations of breath energy in the body: where it flows, where it doesn't flow, how you can make it flow without putting any force on it, simply thinking, "It can flow." A very solid and very nourishing, very healthy sense of well-being will come up if you tend to this properly and consistently with patience.

Sometimes you hear there is no such thing as a good meditation or a bad meditation. That's not true. If you approach the meditation with these qualities, it's going to succeed. If your desire isn't well focused, if your efforts are lackadaisical, you don't pay much attention, and you don't try to figure out when things are going wrong why they're going wrong, then it's not going to grow. It's not going to succeed. You have to be confident that you can succeed with the breath. That's all you need: your awareness and the breath. It's like the artist with the ballpoint pen. Make the most of what you've got, even though it may seem limited. You can learn some really amazing things about the mind, things that make the mind even more grounded, more secure, because you work at this consistently.