

The Four Bases of Power

Iddhi, the Pali word translated here as "power," has so many meanings that no one English equivalent can do them all justice. Other equivalents that have been suggested include success, accomplishment, and prowess.

In the context of the bases for power, however, the word specifically means the supranormal powers that can be developed through concentration, such as levitation, walking on water, clairaudience, clairvoyance, remembrance of past lives, the ability to read the minds of others, and the ending of mental effluents.

In the Buddhist analysis, only the last of these powers is transcendent. It is the only one absolutely necessary on the path to Awakening. The others are optional and not always desirable, for an unawakened person might find that the attainment of any one of them can cause supranormal greed, aversion, or delusion to arise in the mind.

The texts record cases where even Arahants, not fully sensitive to the effect that their actions might have on others, display their powers in inappropriate contexts. This was why the Buddha forbade his monastic disciples from displaying their powers before the laity. None of the displayable powers, he said, is any match for the wonder of a teaching that, like his, gave the promised results when put into practice [*Digha Nikaya*, 11].

Still, there is no denying that some people acquire these powers in the course of their meditation, and they need guidance in how to use them properly so that their powers can actually help, rather than hinder, their practice. This is the role that the standard formulae for the bases of power play in the teaching. They show how the mastery of any of the first five powers can be fit into the outline of frame-of-reference meditation [II/B] so that the process of mastery can lead to the sixth and most important power, the ending of the effluents, thus resulting in release.

The texts explain the bases of power in two standard formulae: brief and extended. The brief formula runs as follows:

"There is the case where a monk develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on *desire* and the fabrications of exertion. He develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on *persistence*... concentration founded on *intent*... concentration founded on *discrimination* and the fabrications of exertion."

One of the texts [§64] states that these formulae define the process whereby the bases of power are developed; another [§63] states that they define the bases of power themselves.

The contradiction here can be resolved by noting that the first text defines the bases of power as "whatever practice leads to the attainment of power, the winning of power." Because these processes definitely lead to the attainment of power, they would count as at least part of the bases of power. The first text is probably alluding to the fact that there is more to the process, which is included in the extended formula, discussed below.

Each of these four bases has three component parts: the "fabrications of exertion" (which the texts equate with the four right exertions), concentration, and the mental quality — desire, persistence, intent, or discrimination — on which the concentration is based.

According to §172, desire, persistence, and intent are present in all states of jhāna. Thus the phrase "concentration based on desire" refers to a concentration in which all three qualities are present, but with desire dominant. We should note here that although the *desire* here is directed toward a state of concentration — which is a type of becoming — if that becoming is aimed at going beyond becoming, this desire shifts from a cause of stress to part of the path to its ending. And even though the desire for Awakening, when not yet realized, can be a cause for frustration, that frustration counts as a skillful emotion, as it leads to further efforts along the path [§179]. It is to be transcended, not by abandoning the desire, but by acting on it properly, as explained below, until gaining the desired results.

Discrimination, the fourth mental quality, is not always inherent in jhāna, although when functioning as evaluation it plays a role in the first jhāna, and is definitely present in the fifth factor of noble right concentration [§150], which leads to Awakening. Furthermore, the extended formula for the bases of power shows that discrimination is necessary for the thorough mastery of concentration based on desire, persistence, intent, or discrimination itself so that — in the course of gaining mastery — one develops mindful discernment into the causal patterns of the mind and so can reach Awakening.

We have already shown that the development of concentration involves the three qualities called for in the first stage of frames-of-reference meditation [II/B]: ardency (right exertion), alertness, and mindfulness.

Thus the brief formula for the bases of power, as a description of concentration practice, can be equated with the first stage of frames-of-reference meditation.

Many popular Western writings criticize the four qualities listed in the bases of power — desire, persistence (effort), intent (will), and discrimination (the discriminating mind) — as enemies of proper meditation, both in that they interfere with the calming of the mind and are antithetical to the goal of the Unfabricated, which lies beyond desire, effort, and the categories of discrimination. The first part of the extended formula deals with the first of these criticisms.

"There is the case where a monk develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on desire and the fabrications of exertion, thinking, 'This desire of mine will be neither overly sluggish nor overly active, neither inwardly restricted nor outwardly scattered.'" (Similarly with concentration founded on persistence, intent, and discrimination.)

This passage shows that the problem lies, not in the desire, effort, intent, or discrimination, but in the fact that these qualities can be unskillfully applied or improperly tuned to their task. If they were absent, the practice — if it could be called a practice — would stagnate from loss of direction or motivation. If they ran wild, they would interfere with mindful concentration. So the trick is not to deny them but to tune them skillfully so that they will help focus the mind on the present moment.

Thus, for instance, in the practice of meditation, as with any skill, it is important not to focus desire too strongly on the results one hopes to get, for that would interfere with the mind's ability to focus on giving rise to the causes leading to those results. If, instead, one focuses desire on putting the causes in proper order in the present moment, desire becomes an indispensable part of the process of mastery.

Passage §67 deals with the second criticism — that desire, etc., are antithetical to the goal — by showing that these qualities are necessary for anyone who pursues a path, but are automatically abandoned on reaching the goal at the path's end.

The image of the path is important here, for it carries important implications. First, the path is not the goal; it is simply the way there, just as the road to the Grand Canyon should not be confused with the Grand Canyon itself. Even though many stretches of the road bear no resemblance to the Grand Canyon, that does not mean that the road does not lead there.

Secondly, the path of practice does not cause the goal, it simply leads there, just as neither the road to the Grand Canyon nor the act of walking to the Grand Canyon can cause the Grand Canyon to be.

The goal at the end of the Buddhist path is unfabricated, so no amount of desire or effort can bring it into being. Nevertheless, the path to the goal is a fabricated process [§105], and in that process desire, effort, intent, and discrimination all have an important role to play, just as the effort of walking plays a role in arriving at the Grand Canyon.

The final section of the extended formula hints at how these qualities may be directed toward Awakening.

"He keeps perceiving what is in front and behind so that what is in front is the same as what is behind, what is behind is the same as what is in front. What is below is the same as what is above, what is above is the same as what is below. (He dwells) by night as by day, and by day as by night. By means of an awareness thus open and unhampered, he develops a brightened mind."

This passage refers to the total mastery of concentration. Freeing the mind from such distinctions as front/behind, above/below, and day/night, one creates an awareness that is open and bright, unhampered by the normal limitations that come with a conscious sense of being located in time and space. This is the type of awareness needed for the attainment of the supranormal powers.

Many meditators tend to stop here, satisfied with their new-found powers, but the Buddha urges them to go further. As §161 shows, the full perfection of this type of awareness requires extreme sensitivity to the presence of mental defilements that might place subtle limitations on it.

This process of sensitivity is nothing other than the second stage of frames-of-reference meditation [II/B], in which one focuses on the phenomenon of origination and passing away of mind states that are limited and unlimited, concentrated and unconcentrated, taking the brightness of one's awareness — the mind in-and-of itself — as one's frame of reference.

The next stage of practice is outlined in a passage that builds on §161. This passage [§167], shows that full mastery of power requires an abandoning even of the notion that "I am" the master of the power, or that "my mind" is concentrated. The proper attitude, in the face of the power, is to "incline the mind to the Deathless."

Such an attitude, according to *Majjhima Nikaya*, 102 [MFU, pp. 81-82], involves simply noting what is present as present, without fashioning anything further out of it. This is the third stage of frames-of-reference meditation [II/B], the entry into emptiness that simply notes, "There is this..." When this level of skilled discrimination is reached, the power has been fully mastered at the same time that the mind stands on the verge of non-fashioning and Awakening.

Because of their association with supranormal powers, the bases of power have generally been slighted in Western writings on Buddhism. If we count the five strengths as identical with the five faculties, the bases of power are the only set in the Wings to Awakening that has not yet been the subject of a book in the English language.

The situation in Asia, however, is very different. There, the bases of power have been extrapolated from their specific context and are frequently cited as guides to success in general.

In whatever task one may undertake — directed toward worldly ends or toward the Dhamma — one must bring to bear the qualities of desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination, skillfully balanced with concentration and right exertion, if one wants to succeed at one's task.

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