

## *Determined to Practice*

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There are passages in the Canon that say that when the conditions for the practice are in place, then it doesn't require an act of will to progress from one stage to the next: to abandon unskillful behavior, to get the mind into concentration, to develop discernment, to gain release. All these things follow naturally from the initial conditions. The problem is those initial conditions: Those are the things that *do* require an act of will. They don't happen on their own.

There are two primary ones that the Buddha mentions. One is friendship with admirable people—in other words, the people you take as your examples, the people you want to imitate. You want to spend time with those people, listen to their Dhamma, but not just listen of their words—listen to the Dhamma in their behavior. Be around them. Pick up their values; pick up their attitudes.

This means, of course, that when you're away from the monastery, meditating on your own, you have to create an atmosphere in which you're surrounded by the values of the noble ones. This is why we have Dhamma books and recorded Dhamma talks, to keep you in touch with their values. Because otherwise, the values of the world pull you in all sorts of other directions. So if you're thinking about practicing at home and setting up the conditions, this is the first thing. Make sure you read plenty of Dhamma, listen to the Dhamma talks, and develop not only friendship outside but friendship inside.

That's the second quality. It's called appropriate attention—looking at your life with the purpose of putting an end to suffering, reminding yourself that this is *the* most important issue in life, and not letting the mind get waylaid by other issues. There are so many other things we know in life, and the overload of information gets heavier and heavier all the time. But it is an overload. There's a lot of knowledge out there that, from the Buddha's point of view, counts as ignorance. In other words, it's not related to the issue of putting an end to suffering at all. It gets in the way and pulls you off in all sorts of other directions. So you have to look at your own views, your own understanding of what's

important, and how to look at yourself, asking those questions: Where is the suffering here? What's causing it? How can it be put to an end?

When you recognize where there's suffering, you realize that there's a duty to be done: to try to comprehend it. This is not our normal reaction to suffering. Our normal reaction is to run away or to push it away. But if you run away or push it away, you don't understand it, and it keeps coming back, as if it's on an elastic: The more you push it away, the more it snaps back at you. You run away, and it drags on the ground behind you.

So you have to turn around and look at it. Where's the connection? What's the elastic that's tying you to this? When you see what the cause is, then you can let that go. The image they in the Canon is of a fire burning. In those days they believed that fire was clinging to its fuel. And because it clung, it was stuck. But notice that the condition of being stuck doesn't come from the fuel. It comes from the fire. In the same way, our minds are stuck on things because we cling to them. It's not that the things themselves have an adhesive; our mind is covered with adhesive. When we learn how to peel that away, the suffering ends. We do that by developing the qualities of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment.

You read about the precepts and ask yourself: To what extent does my behavior fit in with the precepts, and to what extent does it not? If it doesn't, there's work to be done—in particular, the precept on speech. The Buddha points out four kinds of wrong speech: lying; divisive speech—in other words, you say things to split people apart from each other, or to prevent friendships from happening, if you think that a friendship among two other people might be threatening to you; harsh speech—in other words, speech that's simply meant to hurt other people's feelings; and then idle chatter—speech that doesn't have any real purpose at all. You want to make sure to be very strict with yourself about these things.

In the beginning, it may feel confining, especially when you deal with the issue of humor, because so much of our humor involves fantasy or exaggeration. You have to learn how to figure out other ways of seeing the humor in life, and expressing it skillfully. By raising the bar, your humor gets better. The humor of

truth is much more memorable than mere fantasy or exaggeration. Concentration and discernment then will be much easier to attain as your precepts get better.

But notice that these two qualities—friendship with admirable people and appropriate attention—really do require an act of determination. You have to be very, very selective about the friends you choose, the things you choose to read and listen to, and the thoughts in your own mind that you choose to listen to as well. This requires determination.

Underlying all this, of course, is goodwill. And that—as the Buddha specifically says—is a form of determination. This goes against what you ordinarily hear in a lot of modern Buddhist circles: that our true nature is compassionate; our true nature is one of loving-kindness. The Buddha says No. Goodwill is a determination. You have to set your mind on it. We all want happiness in one way or another, but genuine goodwill is when you realize that you want a happiness that's secure, a happiness that's blameless, a happiness that's long-term. And for it to be long-term, you have to be sensitive to the needs and desires of other people, all of whom want to be happy, too. You can't make your happiness depend on their suffering. This is an attitude you have to consciously develop and to maintain in all situations.

If you really wish for your own true well-being, then you'll be more likely to seek out admirable friends and more likely to apply the standards of appropriate attention to your experience.

So this is a question you want to ask yourself as you choose your various actions and as you shape your life as you go through the day: Do you really wish for true happiness or are you going to settle for something less? Remember the example of the Buddha and all the noble ones: They set their sights high and, as a result, they received a high level of happiness. As the saying goes, you never hit higher than you aim, so aim high. Beware of any friends or anything you hear or any thoughts in your own mind that would persuade you to aim lower.

If you stick with this determination to have genuine goodwill for yourself, have genuine goodwill for those around you, and use that to underlie the principles of admirable friendship, appropriate attention, then your practice will develop naturally.