

Determination

June 29, 2017

Start the meditation by articulating to yourself what you want to do for the hour: to stay with the breath, to stay with the body, or to work on a particular problem that you know you have in the meditation. It's always good to have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish, because that makes it easier to notice when you're wandering off and easier to get back on course. You remind yourself that this is what you wanted to do for the hour. Why are you not doing it?

This quality is called determination. It's one of the perfections. In fact, it contains all of the other perfections within it. As the Buddha said, determination has four qualities. The first is discernment, in other words, being discerning in your goals, choosing good goals for yourself, and then being discerning in how you're going to go about attaining those goals. That's the first quality. The second quality is truthfulness. Once you've made up your mind to do something, you really stick with it. The third quality is generosity. There are things you're going to have to give up in order to attain that goal. Think of the practice as like a game of chess. You're going to have to lose some of your pieces. If you're not willing to lose your pieces, you're not going to win. You have to decide that some pieces are more valuable than others and you're willing to give them up. Finally, there's calm—the quality that allows you to stick with the practice when things are not going well and to not get too excited when things are going well, because you want to bring the mind to a state of balance. You know that you've chosen a good goal for yourself when you find that when you've attained the goal, there's a sense of peace.

Those are the four main aspects of a good determination. And as I said, the perfections are all in there. The perfection of discernment and the perfection of goodwill come under discernment. You start by realizing that there are some things that you like to do that are going to give bad results and other things that you don't like to do are going to give good results. You have to learn how to talk yourself into doing the right thing in both cases, not letting your likes or dislikes run things. You have to stick with your perception of what's going to be skillful and what's not.

In other words, discernment is strategic. It's not just a matter of knowing about emptiness or not-self or dependent co-arising. It's looking at your mind, figuring it out: What are the obstacles? What's the allure of the things that are unskillful? What image have you built in your mind about things that are skillful that's getting in the way? Can you get past those images? Can you replace them

with new ones? Can you see that the allure of the unskillful course is not worth the results you're going to get?

That's basic discernment, and it goes together with goodwill. As the Buddha said, if you have ill will for anyone, that's wrong view. The desire for anybody to suffer is wrong view. So you want to make sure that whatever your goal is that it's conducive to genuine happiness, which means a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. After all, if your happiness is harmful to other people, they're not going to stand for it. It's not going to last, which is why goodwill has to go both into your choice of a goal and into your choice of the means of attaining that goal.

As for the quality of truthfulness, this covers the perfection of truthfulness and also the perfection of virtue. Truthfulness means not just telling the truth but also sticking with something that know is really good no matter how hard it may be. The virtues of the precepts carry that principle through. You make up your mind that you're going to avoid harmful behavior and you stick with it. You're mindful, you're alert, and you're ardent to make sure that you remember the precepts and you're alert to what you're actually doing.

There was a case years back when one of Ajaan Fuang's students came to the monastery. She saw everybody else taking the eight precepts, so she decided she'd take the eight precepts, too. Later that afternoon, as she was walking past a guava tree in the monastery, there was one instant when one of the guavas was on the branch and the next instant it was in her mouth, almost without thinking. Ajaan Fuang happened to see that and said, "Hey, I thought you were taking the eight precepts." That was a case of no mindfulness and no alertness.

So if you're going to stick with the precepts, you have to be mindful, you have to be alert, all of which are the qualities we try to develop here as we meditate. And you have to be ardent. On the days when you don't feel like holding to the precept or when something really tempting comes along and tempts you to break the precept, you have to remind yourself: No. You put up an effort. This brings in another one of the perfections, which is the perfection of persistence, the perfection of effort itself.

As for generosity, it includes giving and renunciation. Being willing to give to others is often a good way of succeeding in your determination. You realize that many of the things that you want in life do require the cooperation of other people, so if you share with them, it's easier to get their cooperation. As for renunciation, that deals specifically with renouncing your sensual desires, because a lot of the things in life that are really worth fighting for, really worth struggling for, will require that you put up with physical difficulties. You have to be willing to put up with pain, so you learn how to replace that with the pleasure of

concentration. People often miss this point. They think that renunciation is totally barren: You give up good things and there's nothing much to show for it. Actually, you're giving up candy so that you can have gold. The pleasure of renunciation is the pleasure of concentration, which gives you the strength you need. In this way, giving some things up actually gives you more strength.

And finally, under the principle of calm, you have equanimity and patience. Patience means realizing that it's going to take a while sometimes, especially if you've got a large object or a large goal, and so the secret to patience is not focusing on how difficult things are, but focusing on where your strengths are. You rely on those strengths to keep going.

As for equanimity, it realizes that there are a lot of things in life that we won't be able to accomplish due to our kamma or other people's kamma. Beforehand, you don't know what those things are going to be, but you can't let that get you down. You've got to have the determination to do the best you can. If it so happens that circumstances outside beyond your control get in the way, you don't let yourself get upset, because you realize, okay, even though you haven't yet attained your outside goal, still you've developed all these good qualities of mind, and those are what count. Those are the treasures you can actually keep with you.

I've been reading recently about a French diplomat, Talleyrand, who for fifty years fought for the idea that France should have a constitutional monarchy. This was during the time of the absolute monarchy, the revolutions, the time of Napoleon, the time of the Restoration. He faced one setback after another after another after another, but he never gave up. He kept springing back, springing back. Finally, after almost fifty years, he was able to get things settled in France so that it did have a constitutional monarchy. That required a lot of equanimity along the way.

So think of equanimity not as being resigned to things but as a kind of resilience, that if the opportunity doesn't come now, it may come later, remembering that in the meantime you have developed your perfections. This world we live in is an imperfect world. Look around you. So many things that people have fought for, so many things that people have accomplished then get washed away, but you can't let yourself get discouraged over that fact. Think of all the people whose lives have been ruined by warfare: the things they wanted, the things they dreamed about, and then they see society collapsing all around them. What's good about the Buddha's teachings is that they give you something to live for, something to focus on even though there are social forces beyond your control. You develop the perfections of the mind in an imperfect world because it's the qualities of the mind that really count. In another one of the Buddha's

teachings, he calls those your treasures—your noble treasures which, unlike the usual treasures of the world, can't be affected by fire or water or all the other social forces out there that can take all your money away and make it useless, make it worthless.

So as you look at your life and look at your meditation, think of the Buddha, think of the great ajaans. They were people of strong determination. In the Buddha's case, he was looking for something deathless in a world where nobody had found it before, yet he stuck with his quest. As for the ajaans, many of them came from very poor backgrounds, yet they were able to find the deathless, too. It was through their determination. So think about the qualities of determination, think about the perfections of the mind as your main accomplishment. That's how you find perfect happiness in an imperfect world.