

Determination

January 1, 2020

All phenomena, the Buddha said, are rooted in desire. So why is it that we don't get all the things we want? It's because our desires pull in so many different directions, some of them skillful, some of them not. And when we focus on what we want, we don't usually think about what the long-term consequences will be, so often the long term turns out bad.

One of the ways of solving this problem is to learn how to develop the right kind of determination. In other words, focus your desires on the things that really are important. Learn to train your desires so that the important ones, the skillful ones, take precedence; the lesser ones take lesser precedence; and the ones that are really unskillful get pushed out. This is the basic teaching of the four noble truths. There are certain kinds of craving that lead to suffering. There are certain desires, in the factor of right effort in the path, that lead to the end of suffering.

So the Buddha's basically giving us guidance in how to sort through our desires. That guidance comes first in the path as right view. And when he talks about determination, discernment comes first. You have to stop and think, "What do you really want in life?" and think about what's going to be required to get it. What kind of person will you become? What activities do you have to master to get what you want? You can go through all kinds of different possible goals and ask yourself, "Is it going to be worth it?"

You also have to think about the amount of time involved. Do you have time for all of the things you want? If something is really important, you should be willing to pare everything else down so that the really important things can get all the time they need.

Then you've got to learn how to think strategically: "To get what I want, what do I have to do?" That's another lesson from the four noble truths. We want the end of suffering, but we can't just go straight there. We've got to go via the path, and the path requires work. It requires that you master certain skills, such as learning how to say No to a lot of desires: the desires that would go against the precepts, the desires that would lead to ill will, the desires that would pull the mind out of its concentration. You want to learn how to sort these things through and you have to realize that there are certain skills you've got to develop in order to get where you want.

So when you sit down and think about your New Year's resolutions or your resolutions for your life as a whole, you have to start with discernment: to be wise

in your choice of your goals and wise in your choice of the means by which you're going to get to the goals.

Then the next factor in determination is truthfulness, which means really sticking with what you've determined to do. This is a quality of a good heart. We tend to think of people who are good-hearted as being kind, gentle, and benevolent, but not necessarily strong. Sometimes we actually think of good-hearted people as being kind of weak. But when you stop and think about it, if your heart is really good, if it's really in the right place, then you don't want it to waver from that right place. So you've got to train it to be strong. This is why in the perfections—which are basically the qualities that come into determination in one way or another—goodwill is part of the factor of discernment. In other words, you choose things that really will be for your own well-being and the well-being of others.

But then the other heart qualities besides goodwill focus on things like persistence and endurance: the strengths that see you through. These depend on the third quality, which is relinquishment. There are things you're going to have to give up. But when you give them up, you have to give them up in a way that you're not just depriving yourself. We tend to think of renunciation and relinquishment as deprivation. But when the Buddha talks about renunciation, he's talking about getting the mind into right concentration, which is the opposite of deprivation. It's a trade up.

Right concentration is your food. It's your strength. He doesn't have you follow the path starving all the way and then finally getting food at the very end. He gives you food to carry along, or the skill by which you can find food all along the side of the path. That's one of Ajaan Lee's images. You follow the path back and forth, back and forth, and you begin to get to know the different plants growing on the side of the path. You figure out which ones are edible, which ones are medicine. And concentration is edible. It's good food that's nourishing, because you're going to need the strength in order to keep your good-heartedness alive.

So why is it renunciation? You're renouncing sensual thoughts as you're getting the mind concentrated. Your fascination with thinking about physical food, the pleasures of clothing, the pleasures of shows, all the things that people tend to talk about all the time: You have to say, "No, I'm not going to talk about those to myself right now. I'm going to talk to myself about the breath. Let go of other things. Hold on right here."

It's interesting to note that when Ajaan Lee, especially in his early teachings, talks about concentration, he talks about different themes that get the mind in the

right attitude to want to let go of things outside. He has you think about the different parts of the body and about how many of the things in the world you find interesting because of the needs of the body. But when you look at the body itself, just on its own, what have you got? Take it apart piece by piece, and there's not much. As you think about things in terms of the elements, your body's just the same kind of elements as the world outside. It came from those things. It's going to go back to them. Or you can think about inconstancy, stress, and not-self. So many of the things that you could want out in the world are not worth the effort to go into them. You work hard to get them, and then they slip through your fingers. When you think in these terms, you drop, drop, drop a lot of the concerns of the world outside. And once those things are dropped, it's easier for the mind to settle in and to be willing to stay right here. And as you stay right here, you realize you're not depriving yourself.

You're finding a new source of well-being inside. And it goes *deep* inside. Here it is, right close to the mind. The breath is the closest thing to the mind there is. It's through the breath energy that you know the body, and through the body that you know the rest of the world. So get to know this first point of contact. And learn to make use of it so that it really is nourishing. This will enable you to develop the fourth set of qualities the Buddha said goes with a good determination, and that's calm: your powers of endurance, your powers of equanimity.

You learn to endure harsh words from other people. You learn to endure physical pain, partly through the strength of the concentration. But also you have to learn to how to use your discernment. With harsh words, you learn how to depersonalize them. In other words, you realize: This is the normal way of human speech. People speak this way all over the world. Sometimes they say true things; sometimes they say things that are not true. That's normal. Sometimes they say things with good intentions, sometimes with bad intentions. Sometimes they'll praise you; sometimes they'll criticize you. This is a normal speech of the world. The Buddha himself was criticized. People lied about the Buddha. So what about us? What can we expect?

When you think in these terms, it's a lot easier to live with the things that people say that grate against your ears. Then the next step, of course, is that you just leave them right at the ears. There's a great passage where the Buddha says, "Just tell yourself, 'Sn unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.' And just drop it right there."

The reason we don't drop it is that we want to feed on these things. This is another reason why you need your good powers of concentration: to give yourself

an alternative food so you don't get worked up about all the injustices and the mistreatment dished out either to you or to the people around you. This doesn't mean that you simply sit there and do nothing. But it does mean you've got to learn how to get the mind on an even keel so that if you watch these things and look at where they're coming from, you can think strategically to figure out the best way to put an end to the injustice without getting your mind swallowed up with anger.

This is the kind of endurance and equanimity the Buddha's talking about, like the endurance and equanimity of a soldier. Sometimes in the battle he has setbacks. Sometimes he has to endure hardships. But he can't let himself get upset by them. At the same time, he doesn't give up. He keeps wanting to gain victory. But he realizes that it may take time. In this way, he nourishes himself with that thought, uses his wisdom, uses his concentration, uses his virtue.

There's an interesting passage where Citta the householder is about to die. Some devas come to see him and say, "Set your mind on becoming a universal monarch, ruler of the continent of India, because you'd be a good ruler." And the reason they gave is that he was a virtuous person. When a virtuous person sets his or her mind on something, it's much more likely to succeed. The various factors of a good determination come down to the factors of the triple training: truthfulness comes under virtue, relinquishment, renunciation, and calm come under concentration, and discernment comes under discernment.

So on this first day of the new year, it's a good time to stop and think, "Where are you going?" You don't want to simply go with the flow. You want to be the kind of person who determines the flow, so where do you want to determine it to go? What would be the best place? What would be the best way to go about it? Think in these terms, realizing that you can't get everything you want and you're going to have to deal with some obstreperous desires who go in different directions. But if you can learn how to get some order in your desires, and focus on the ones that really are in your own best interest, then this convention we have of making resolutions, making determinations at the new year really will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.