

## *Determination*

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When you first hear those stories where a character is granted three wishes, the first reaction usually is, “Wouldn’t that be cool!”; anything you wanted... three wishes. It gets you thinking. But then as you think, you begin to realize three wishes is awfully few. You look at all the things you want, and you realize that if you were going to take advantage of that opportunity, you’d have to really think through your wishes: which ones are the most important. You’d have to be willing to put a lot of other wishes aside.

Well, that’s what death does. It makes you realize that the field of possibilities is limited. You’re limited in time, limited in energy, and even before death comes, illness can come, aging comes, and the range of things you can gain out of life, the desires that you have that could be fulfilled, are pretty limited.

This is where determination comes in, when you decide that there’s a limited number of things that are really most important to you, and you want to make sure that your other wishes don’t get in the way.

Think about the Buddha, and all the things he could have had in life. He finally realized what he really most wanted was something that wouldn’t die. The stories have been built up around the legend of the Buddha tell us about how his family said, “Oh that’s impossible.” His friends told him, “It’s impossible. Think of all the great people in the past who had to satisfy themselves with sensual pleasures, power, the things of the world.” In the legends, the bodhisattva says, “Well, in that case, they’re not admirable people if they’re willing to content themselves with that.”

There must have been something of that attitude in the young bodhisattva’s quest when he left home. He gave up all those things: all those comforts of home, all the possibilities of power and wealth. He said what he really wanted more than anything else was something that wouldn’t die, and he sought what was skillful—in other words, actions that were skillful in leading there. What would work?

We have to reflect on our own practice in the same way. There are a lot of things we have to give up, not only in terms of material comforts, but also in terms of many of our cherished ideas.

You have to realize that this is one of those paths where you have to take as little luggage as possible. There will be a lot of things you'll have to give up, but fortunately the path doesn't save all of its rewards for the end. Of the various kinds of clinging that the Buddha talks about, three of them you can actually use on the path, because clinging, of course, means feeding, and you're going to have to feed as you practice.

The only type of clinging that's not to be engaged in is sensuality. And remember what sensuality means: It's your fascination with fanaticizing about sensual pleasures.

You don't have to give up sensual pleasures altogether, just this fascination with planning for this, planning for that, and then saying, "No, how about this? How about that?" You've got to put all that aside; there's no room for that. Which means you have to find your pleasures elsewhere. This is why we hold on to the practice of concentration. That's our alternative pleasure. And we adopt views that are helpful on the path.

Here again, there are a lot of things we hold dearly in terms of our ideas of right and our ideas of wrong, but if they get in the way, what's their value? There's a certain value in the sense that they're *your* ideas, and they've worked for you in the world, but you have to see that there are a lot of things that you have to give up—to adopt the Buddha's ideas of what's actually right and wrong, because after all, there is the right path and there's the wrong path.

There's so much resistance to this idea here in the West. People try to redefine the word right, *sammā*, as meaning wholesome, healthy, or balanced. But the opposite of *sammā* is not unbalanced or unhealthy. It's *micchā*, which means wrong.

Some of the wrong things are explained in the texts, but there are other things that are not quite so obviously wrong right away, because we don't see how they might cause harm. But when you know that the Buddha criticized them, you have to ask yourself, "Are you going to hold on to your old ideas of right and wrong, or give the Buddha's a try?" Because he wasn't the sort of person who liked to set up rules just for the fun of setting up rules, or make pronouncements because he liked to make pronouncements.

As he said, there's nothing in excess and nothing lacking in the path. So when he went to the trouble of saying that something is wrong, okay, you take that to heart. When he went to the trouble of saying something is right, you take that to heart. If he said that something is irrelevant to the practice, you say, "I'm going to just put that aside." Hold on to the views that he recommends and see where they take you, because that's his challenge with all these forms of clinging: clinging to the practice of concentration, clinging to right view, clinging to the idea

that you are capable of doing this. He says, try this, try it out. See if it works.

Of course, to see if it works, you have to be trained to be a good judge of what's working, and what's not. I don't know how many people have said, "Well, I tried meditation, and it just didn't work for me." They didn't put in the work. You have to develop your energy, your persistence, your stick-with-it-iveness, your mindfulness and alertness, to refine your discernment so that when you see the results of your actions, you can be a good judge of them.

When things are not going well, is it a sign that the path is not going to work at all, or simply that you're not doing something right? You have to go back and check. That willingness to go back and check has saved a lot of people. So remember that the practice requires that you look all around.

There's one passage where the Buddha says that you need a good eye in order to practice. He compares the meditator to a good shopkeeper. One of the attributes of a good shopkeeper is that he has a good eye. He knows at a glance what kind of items he can buy cheaply and sell for a profit.

The Buddha compares this with someone who's able to see the four noble truths. And even though you may not be seeing things obviously in that framework, still when you see things in terms of: What are you doing that's causing suffering? What can you do to stop that? —That's when you develop your good eye.

One of the other attributes is that you're astute. For the shopkeeper, this means that you know how to go about buying something cheap and how to get other people to buy what you're trying to sell. The astute practitioner is someone who practices right effort. You notice this again, and again, the connection between discernment and right effort. Right effort is not just brute effort, it's wise effort.

And then finally the Buddha said that a good shopkeeper has backers: people who deposit money with him and say, "Okay, use this to buy and sell, and pay us back with interest." In the case of the practice, having good backers means having someone you can go to and ask when things are not going well on the path: "What might be wrong?" Or when there's something in the Buddha's teachings that you don't understand: "How do you explain this?" In other words, you should take advantage of the fact that we are a community.

So you want to develop that good eye, so that you can see what you're doing, and what you may be doing wrong. That way, you can learn.

Be open to the possibility that you're doing things wrong. As long as you haven't reached

the end of suffering, you're still doing something wrong. Learn to take that fact with the right attitude, not get wiped out by it, and not get discouraged. Take it as a challenge, and be up for the challenge. Because after all, what would be better than a happiness that doesn't die?

If you could get just that one wish, as the Buddha said, the other hardships that go into the practice wouldn't mean anything. You wouldn't see them as hardships at all, once you attained that goal. It's that worthwhile.

So look at the excess baggage you're carrying around, and the obstacles you're putting in your path, and see if you can clear them away. As for all your excess desires that head off in different directions, learn how to tame them. Get them to point in the right direction, in line with your determination.

Because this desire to find something that's deathless, a deathless happiness, really does ennoble life. Even if you can't get there all the way in this lifetime, the fact that you've put yourself on the path and made that your goal—that's what makes your life noble as well.