

Determination

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When you read the passages where the ajaans talk about their practice, you're often struck by the large role that determination played—the vows they would take and then their determination to see those vows through. This has a lot to do with their ability to develop concentration and discernment.

In other words, they encountered problems, and they didn't let the problems get them down. They figured that there must be a way around them, and they made a determination. If you think of the mind as a committee, when you make a determination like that, you're basically putting out a warning to any members of the committee that might want to be traitorous that they would be recognized as traitors and shot. That gives the mind a strong impetus to carrying through.

When the Buddha talked about determination, there were four qualities he would talk about. They're useful to keep in mind as you deal with problems that come up in the meditation—as with pain.

The first quality is discernment, remembering that you're not simply going to be sitting with the pain. You're going to be trying to figure it out. And the extent to which you do have to be patient and show endurance, you need to figure out ways of making it as easy as possible—in other words, getting allies on your side.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. In the instructions on breath meditation, when the Buddha talks about feelings, the first two steps are to learn how to breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of rapture and feelings of ease. You're going to need these as you deal with pain, remembering that the pain doesn't consume the whole body. There are parts of the body that are perfectly fine. So you focus on those. Learn how to maximize those. Get them on your side.

When they're strong, you try to use them to see how much you can dissolve away the different shells of tension you've built up around the pain. There is that instinctive reaction: When pain comes, you try to contain it. You tense up around it to make sure that it doesn't spread. This is a habit we picked up, probably when we were children. But you've got to decide you're not afraid of the pain. You've got your allies on your side. So you spread that sense of well-being, the comfortable breath, through the pain to dissolve away that shell of tension. Then sometimes you'll find that the pain is gone. It was the shell that was bothering you. Other times, though, the pain will still be there, but you can see it more clearly. And you can see it coming and going, coming and going.

You remember what the ajaans have taught about how *the* big problem with pain is the way you've built a bridge from the pain in the body into the mind through your perceptions. So you have to ask yourself what perception you have around the pain. Is the pain the same thing as the part of the body where it's located? Is it something else? Does it have an intention toward you? Is it coming at you? What shape, what color does it have in your imagination? These are all perceptions that can gather around the pain and cause trouble. If you notice that a certain perception brings more of a sense of weighing down the mind, ask yourself if you can drop the perception and see what happens.

Here you're moving from the first determination, which is discernment, to the second one, which is truth: really looking at how things are going and not flinching at what you see. You use these two determinations together, still trying to figure out the pain. Why do you use a certain perception? How can you replace it with a better one?

I think I've told you about the time I was having my back treated in Singapore. I was basically being beaten by bamboo whisks after the skin had been rubbed raw. It was very painful. I realized that the part of the pain that was getting to me was the sense that the pain was coming at me. I realized I could see the pain as going away, as when you're sitting in the back of a station wagon facing back. Someone else is driving down the road; you're facing back. As soon as something comes into the range of your vision, it's going away from you. See if that perception helps.

In other words, the problem is not the pain; the problem is the perception. And the *real* problem is our ignorance around the perceptions. We apply these perceptions partly as a way of warning the future as we go from moment to moment to moment. "Okay, there's a pain here. Watch out, there's a pain here." That warning signal takes over and weighs the mind down. So see if you can be with the experience—the sensation of the pain but without the perception—and see what that does. You don't have to warn the next moment to watch out for the pain.

You're relinquishing old ways of thought. That's another one of the determinations: Give up anything that's unskillful so that you can bring the mind to calm, the fourth determination. "Calm" here can mean either learning how to be with the pain with a sense of calm, or seeing that when the mind calms down, sometimes the pain goes away. But with the release, you want to make sure that even if the pain stays there, the mind is not causing any excess trouble. You'll also see that the trouble that weighs the mind down is with what you're doing.

So if you're determined to see these things through, these qualities really will help: discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm. They work in dealing with

other defilements as well. If lust or anger comes up, use your discernment. Remember what the Buddha says: You go for things because of their allure and you turn a blind eye to their drawbacks. So that's precisely what you've got to discern: Where's the allure? Why do you like these thoughts? And if you were to act on them and to follow through with them, or just allow the mind to think about them, what would happen? Are they worth it?

Sometimes he'll add, "Look for the origination and look for the passing away." This, too, is part of the determination of discernment. "Origination," of course, means the cause. It's not just simply that things are arising. Something in the mind is causing them to arise. It might be simply a reaction to an uncomfortable feeling. Some people with a sense of dis-ease in the body immediately go for a drug or some other way of soothing to get rid of that feeling. Often, thoughts of anger, thoughts of lust, thoughts of whatever are our addictive escape.

So look for the origination. What exactly sparks these things, and how long do they last? They come and then they go. Then they come again and they go again. You think you're done with them, and then they come back. Why? What's the pull? Then think about the drawbacks, and watch out for the mind's tendency to say, "Well, I'll let myself think this particular kind of thought so I can understand it." Your best way of understanding it is to try and cut it down as quickly as you can, because then you get to see what lies behind it—the part that pulls, that says, "No, no, I just want to think this." If you're determined, you can stare it down.

This is why the determination plays an important part in the unraveling of these things. You can see what truly draws you to these defilements so that you'll be willing to relinquish them. That's when the mind comes to calm.

So determination, even though it focuses primarily on getting the mind to settle down, involves discernment as well. And it *develops* your discernment, too. Your willingness to stick with things is what enables you to see them from the beginning to the end. That's how you come to understand cause and effect.

The Buddha offers these tools for dealing with all kinds of problems in the mind. He gives you the basic instructions. Sometimes you have to work out the details yourself, but the tools are not going to work unless you're determined to make them work. The necessary exploration of how you apply a particular teaching to your particular problems: That's not going to happen unless you're determined to make it happen.

There are so many people out there who say, "Meditation is simply a process of being with whatever comes up and being okay with it." But if you look around at the assumptions that lie behind that idea, basically for them, meditation is a question of learning how to accept the three characteristics: Yes, things are

inconstant, stressful, and not-self. You've just got to accept that—be calm with that. But making the three characteristics *the* big point of discernment: The Buddha never talked in those terms. Discernment was always taught in the context of the four noble truths.

The four noble truths have duties. They're about cause and effect. And their basic message is that if you want, you can put an end to suffering. If you want to suffer, you can continue to suffer. Which do you want? How are you going to look at your thoughts? How are you going to look at your attitudes? You have to look at them in terms of where they come from and where they go—cause and effect. Are you getting the effects you want? If you don't like the effects, it's not a matter of simply accepting them. You tell yourself that there must be something better. You've been operating on the wrong desires.

This is the role of determination. It's a focused, continuous desire not to suffer. As Ajaan Mun said in his last big sermon, it's this desire not to come back and suffer again: That determination is what's going to see you through.