

Determined to Make a Difference

November 4, 2022

All skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness. Heedfulness is the realization that there are dangers in life but those dangers can be avoided through your actions. If you act wisely, act skillfully, you can actually find safety, you can find true well-being.

Our problem is that our desires and our intentions are scattered all over the place.

One of the chants we had just now was a series of teachings that a monk gave to a king. He said that it was through reflecting on these teachings that he himself had decided to become a monk: *The world is swept away, it does not endure; it offers no shelter, there's no-one in charge; it has nothing of its own, one has to pass on leaving everything behind; but it's insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.* In other words, we keep wanting to come back for these things that we then have to leave behind. We keep wanting to come back to this place that offers no shelter, that keeps getting swept away. That's the danger. We don't see the connection between our cravings and the sufferings they lead to.

On the other hand, though, there are actions that we can do—again, based on desire, *skillful* desire—that can bring us safety. That's what the other chant was about. We start with finding wise people to associate with; learning restraint; developing all sorts of good qualities in the mind and in our outside actions—that's our protection.

Ordinarily, we find ourselves swinging back and forth between wanting to do skillful things and wanting to do unskillful things. Our minds are scattered. Our intentions are scattered. Like the light of the sun: It spreads out in all directions. But it is possible to take a magnifying glass and focus the sun's rays on things and actually set fire to them. In the same way, it is possible to focus your desires on good things and make a genuine difference in your life. That's what the perfection of determination is all about.

The Pali word for determination, *adhiṭṭhāna*, can also mean *resolution* or *vow*. When you develop determination as a perfection, you focus your desires on achieving something really good. It's one of the qualities of the Buddha. After all, he made a determination that he wanted to gain awakening—and not just gain awakening. He wanted to gain it in such a way that he could teach the Dhamma so that other people could gain awakening, too. Without strong desire, without strong focus, he never would have been able to have accomplished that.

So it's good to reflect on what he had to say about determination, so that we can take those lessons and apply them in our own lives, apply them right now as we're meditating.

He said you start with discernment—you choose a wise goal—and then you reflect on the wise ways to achieve that goal. In this case, we want to gain discernment into our own minds, which means we have to learn how to focus them, get them to be still, and to follow all the other elements of the path that are required to provide a good foundation for concentration: Generosity, virtue—these things are necessary.

As the Buddha said, a stingy person can't get into the stages of right concentration. As for virtue, it is possible for unvirtuous persons to get their minds concentrated, but there's an element of dishonesty in that concentration, which means it can't be trusted. If, however, you're used to recognizing your own unskillful intentions—and learn how to say No to them—that provides you with the training you need for your concentration to be more reliable.

After all, to stick to a precept requires *mindfulness*—keeping the precept in mind; *alertness*—watching what you're doing right now, to make sure that your actions are in line with your intentions to stick by the precept; and then *ardency*—the heartfelt desire to really do this well.

There will be times when it's difficult to maintain a precept. There will be things pulling you in other directions. The Buddha listed at least three: There are times when the precepts will force you to give up some wealth, to lose your relatives, or to sacrifice your health. You can imagine there might be times when the only way to get food would be to steal it, and you say, “No, I can't steal.” So you have to do without. Or to provide for your relatives: If you had to steal to provide for them, you have to say, “No, I can't steal.” That's going to require discernment to figure out how to stick by the precept and yet not be harmed, and not do harm in those ways. So, by following the precepts you're learning a lot of good skills that you're going to need to meditate.

Once the mind settles down, then you focus it on the question: “What am I doing that's causing unnecessary stress and suffering, and how can I stop?” That's the essence of discernment: “What am I doing that's causing this?” You're looking toward your own actions as the cause of suffering. You're not simply watching things arise and pass away, thinking that there's wisdom in seeing them arise and pass away. You have to see how they're caused. When the Buddha uses the word *cause*, *samudaya*, here—sometimes translated as *origination*—it means a cause arising *in the mind*. So, you keep looking inward. There's some activity in here that's causing suffering, and you want to catch it.

In this way, you focus on a good goal, and you focus on skillful ways of attaining that goal. That's discernment in your vow, in your determination.

The next element is *truth*: Once you've made up your mind that a goal is worth pursuing, you really are *true* in pursuing it. This gets paired with another element, which is *relinquishment*: There are things that you'll have to give up.

The qualities of the mind are like a garden: We'd like to plant all kinds of plants in our garden, but we realize that some plants, if you put them there, will kill the other plants. If you plant eucalyptus trees, they'll spoil the soil; other plants won't be able to grow.

So, even though there are some forms of happiness that are *both/and*, there are others that *either/or*—you have to make a choice. You have to be happy to give up the things that would be unskillful, and to give up things on a lower level of skill for things on a higher level. It's not just a question of letting go of pains and holding on to pleasures. You have to realize there are some pleasures that will get in the way of greater pleasures.

The Buddha said that this is a sign of discernment. Remember, you're going to be using discernment all throughout this pursuit of your vow. When you realize that there's a greater happiness that comes from being willing to sacrifice a lesser happiness, the wise person will sacrifice the lesser happiness.

That requires the fourth quality, which is *calm*. You have to learn how to keep your mind at peace while you're giving up things that you may really like.

But, you have that ability to talk to yourself. This is one of the most important qualities of the path that tends to get overlooked: how you talk to yourself about what you're doing. To get the mind concentrated, you have to talk to yourself. You keep reminding yourself: "This object that you're focused on is really worth staying with." Then you evaluate it to make sure that the mind stays with it—with a sense of satisfaction, wanting to be here.

Other thoughts will come up, and you have to remind yourself, they're not worth it right now. The Buddha gives some principles for your speech, and they also apply to your thoughts when you meditate: Is it true? Is it beneficial? And, is this the right time? There are a lot of thoughts that might be true and beneficial, but this is not the right time for them. This is the time to stay with your breath, to stay with your meditation word. You want to give some focus to the mind—focus to your purpose in being here.

As the Buddha said, we fabricate our experience for the sake of happiness. So, there's always a *for the sake of* in our experience, but you have to ask yourself, "For the sake of what?" What is your purpose? Fortunately, you get to decide. It's not the case that there's an overarching purpose for the universe that you somehow

have to divine and then fit yourself into it, sacrificing your desires for true happiness for whatever that purpose may be. You can make your true happiness your purpose.

In fact, the Buddha said, it's your wisest purpose. Because your true happiness is something that doesn't take anything away from anyone else, it's totally harmless—if you pursue it right. That's a choice you can make, and that's the whole point of determination: You're making a choice. Out of all the possibilities that you could pursue in life, you're looking for a happiness that doesn't let you down, doesn't change.

I keep running into people who say, “How can nibbāna be permanent? After all, if something is permanent, it's self, right? And there's no self.” Or they believe that to say nibbana is permanent is a kind of eternalism. The Buddha never taught that way. He never talked about an eternal self—the idea of an eternal self he classed as an extreme wrong view—but he *did* talk about a happiness that doesn't change. And perceptions of self and no-self don't apply there. You get there by looking at your experience in terms of not-self, but the experience itself is something other.

Which is why it's a good goal to choose, the most discerning goal to choose, the goal that's most worthy of being truthful to, to make sacrifices for. It's a happiness beyond conditions, so it will never change. So you can be confident and calm that you're on the right path.

It's in this way that the realization that our actions really do make a difference can foster all kinds of skillful qualities in the mind. So, look to your actions.

When we chant the brahmaviharas, we start out with the wish for happiness, “May I be happy,” a wish for all beings to be happy, a wish for all those who are suffering to put an end to their suffering, for those who are happy not to be separated from their happiness. Then we come to equanimity—there's no *may* there. Everything else is *may* this, *may* that, *may* this, but there's no *may* with equanimity. It's simply a statement of fact: All living beings are the owners of their actions.

One of the implications of that statement is that there are a lot of things that you can't change—given people's karma, given your karma—but it also means, as the Buddha said, “Whatever I do for good, or for evil...” You've got that choice. You can make a choice; you can make a difference. Equanimity isn't just passive. It's a matter of focusing our priorities away from areas that we can't change, toward areas that we can. It's because we can make a difference that he started to teach us in the first place.

As he said, if people couldn't abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful qualities, there'd be no point in his teaching. Or, if abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful qualities didn't lead to happiness, he wouldn't have bothered teaching, either. But because our actions *can* make a difference, qualities in our minds *can* make a difference—and they make a good difference: That's why he taught. And that's why we take his teachings seriously.

So, given all the possibilities of the world, you have to ask yourself: What kind of happiness do you want? How do you get it? The Buddha offers some good advice, but he also says that it's something you've got to be determined to do. As he said, in his own case he gained awakening not because he was some sort of god, but because he was heedful, ardent, and resolute. The resolution there connects with his determination and it builds on his heedfulness. You follow through by being ardent—really doing this well. And as he said, these are qualities that were not peculiar to him. We all have these possibilities. These are qualities we can all develop. So, when we have these potentials, the only wise thing to do is to make the most of them.