

Determination

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I was reading a book several years back, comparing a Caucasian meditation center with a Thai temple. The woman who was doing the study was talking to one of the Caucasians one time, telling her that at the Thai temple they weren't doing much meditation. It seemed a shame that they weren't really practicing. And the woman in the center had the good sense to say, "Wait a minute. There's more to the practice than just meditating." She said, "Go back and look more carefully." And sure enough, the people were practicing generosity, they were practicing virtue, they were teaching their children gratitude. And the woman who was doing the study began to realize that there's more to the practice than just sitting here with your eyes closed. We're developing all kinds of good qualities of the mind.

So you can look at your whole life as an opportunity to practice. This doesn't mean that you just try to be mindful all the time or alert or aware all the time. There are many other qualities you've got to develop. One of the lists that's useful to think about is the list of the perfections, the *paramis*. The list doesn't come in the suttas, it actually comes as a result of gathering together all the Jataka tales that were connected with the Buddha's previous lives. The compilers were trying to see: What are the qualities that the Buddha developed on his path? They sorted out the tales by the different qualities and they came up with ten. But all the qualities come down to basically four, which are the qualities related to determination: when you make up your mind that you want to do something, you want to attain a goal. Understanding determination requires understanding the qualities of mind you have to develop as you think about the goal you want to attain, how you're going to attain it, and how you actually go about doing it.

The first quality is discernment. You have to figure out: What's a really wise goal to have? What would be a worthwhile way of dedicating your life? Because you do have the choice: You can dedicate your life to a particular goal or you can just say, "Well, I'll just go with the flow of whatever comes to me." But the flow tends to go down. It very rarely it goes up. There *is* evidence of rivers going up mountains, but it has to be under a lot of pressure, under ice caps. Everywhere else, water goes down. If you just let your life go with what the Thais call *yathaakam*—in other words, wherever your past karma pushes you, you just go in that direction—it's usually not a good direction. You've got to make up your mind, "I want something out of this life. I want something to show for the fact that I've been alive and been through all this suffering. I want something to show for it all."

The Buddha offers as the best goal the end of suffering. But this is a choice you have to make for yourself: How much are you going to focus on that goal? What other goals are you going to have in the meantime?

Once you've chosen your goal, though, you have to figure out what's the best way to reach it. Say you want to find happiness. Well, you have to make sure that your quest for happiness doesn't cause any misery to other people, because otherwise they're going to get in the way of that happiness. They'll try to stop you. So make sure that the way you look for happiness doesn't harm other people. Now, there may be people unhappy with the fact that you're taking this path, but that doesn't count as harming them. But if you're actually harming other people in your path—basically, this means getting them to do things that are against the precepts—then your happiness is not going to last. So you have to aim at a happiness that doesn't oppress other people and doesn't harm anybody else. And the way that you go about it has to be something that doesn't harm any people, either.

This is why, when the Buddha's talking about discernment, goodwill comes along as part of it. There's a passage where he says, "If someone has ill will, does that person have right view?" And the answer, of course, is No. Because right view is all about finding a happiness that's harmless. So in that sense, right view and right resolve go together. We can't really separate them.

Once you've made up your mind about your goal and how you're going to reach it, then the second quality is to be true to what you've figured out. In other words, it's going to ask more of you than you might want to give. But you have to make up your mind: Are you really going to stick with what you discernment tells you is best? Or are you just going to drop it and go back into letting your old karma just push you around?

You see this particularly in the precepts. You make up your mind that you're going to stick with a particular precept, you're going to abandon a particular activity, and you've got to be careful to watch that you do that. There's nobody out there, no karma policeman, enforcing the precepts. You've got to have your own inner policeman to force these things. That requires mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, all of which are good qualities to develop in preparation for the meditation.

So you stick with the goal even when it gets tough. Because you realize that if you can't trust your own vows, if you can't trust your own determinations, what can you trust inside yourself? If you can't trust anything inside yourself, who can you trust outside? As the Buddha said, if you're not a person of integrity, you're not going to recognize integrity outside either. So you've got to develop this quality of internal integrity.

That leads to the third quality, which is generosity, which also entails renunciation: There are going to be things you have to give up. It's not the case that once someone decides on the path of awakening, everybody in the universe is going to clear the path for them and cheer them on. Even in Buddhist societies, a lot of people who want to go for awakening get a lot of push-back from their parents, their families, the society around them. But you have to remember, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, there's nobody who's hired us to be born. There's nobody who's hired us to practice. We're here of our own free will. We're nobody's servant.

This is one of the true ways in which you can show that you really are independent: that you're going to follow this path.

But you have to realize that there'll be a lot of things you have to give up. There are lots of ways that you could advance materially, say, by breaking the precepts. When you hold by the precepts, there are times when you have to do without. Well, you have to decide which is more valuable: the gain you would get from breaking the precepts or the fact that you've *got* this precept that you're holding on to. Renunciation is basically a trade. It's not that you're just giving up everything and leaving yourself with nothing. You're giving up things of lesser value for things of greater value. You're trading candy for gold. The problem is that sometimes it doesn't look like gold yet. You've got just a promissory note. But you look at the candy and you realize if you eat the candy, you're never going to have a chance to get the gold.

So to deal with situations like that, you need a fourth quality, which is calm. You've got to be able to keep your mind calm, equanimous, and patient in the midst of the difficulties of the path, and in particular in the midst of the difficulties of sticking to the path in a world that's not behaving in line with the path. We're trying to develop these perfections in an imperfect world. You look around and it seems to be getting more and more imperfect all the time. But you can't let the tendencies of the world determine how you're going to live your life. After all, it is your life, and it's your decision as to what you want out of this life.

So make that decision well. Use a lot of discernment in choosing your goals. And then remember the other three qualities that go along with that: truth, renunciation, and calm. The calm is there to give you the strength you need in order to stick with the difficult things, so that you can arrive at a deeper calm when you achieve that goal.

All too often, you hear that the Buddha's teachings are about not having goals at all, but that has nothing to do with what he taught. I don't know where that teaching came from—maybe from retreats where they're afraid that people will get too pressured to show something from the retreat. But we're here on a lifelong path, and the path has got to have a goal. So choose your goal well, be truthful in sticking with it, and be calm about giving up the things that get in the way of the goal, the things that you're going to have to sacrifice in order to find something of deeper value.

That's what it means to practice in daily life. In other words, you rearrange your life so that it's in line with your goal. You're not just sticking the practice into little corners or the cracks in your life as you're already living it. It's better to think of living daily life in the context of the practice, rather than practicing in the context of daily life. Make the practice your overarching context.

Always keep that in mind. It puts everything else into perspective.