Determination

July 18, 2008

Tonight’s the night for determining the rains residence. The determining is basically making the determination in the mind. For the monks, it’s making the determination that they’re going to stay here for the three months. In other words, we’re going to greet dawn here every day. The day after the full moon in October. Now, there are a few exceptions. If you have certain kinds of business that you have to get away on—in some cases, you’re invited away to teach or to perform some other meritorious activity—you can go away for up to seven days. But you have to be determined that you’re going to come back within the seven days, and you actually have to do it. Otherwise, you make up your mind you’re going to stay here. Many times, in addition to that, sometimes some people decide it’s time to take on special extra activities for the three months. This is optional. This part applies both to monks and to laypeople. You may decide that your meditation isn’t where you want it to be, so you want to put some more time into it. You might want to listen to the Dhamma more than you have in the past. For the monks, it may mean taking on some extra of the ascetic practices. For laypeople, you may see that your precepts aren’t quite where you want them to be. You decide you’re going to focus on a particular precept. You find yourself engaged too much in idle chatter. You say, “I’m going to try to cut back for the next three months.” Then, at the end of the three months, you can see if your determinization has actually helped your practice. If it has, it’s a good idea then to keep it up. There are four qualities in a good determination. One is before you make up your mind you’re going to do something. You use your discernment, one, to see if the goal that you’ve set in mind is a good goal, and then secondly, to see if the means you’re going to use to get to that goal are appropriate. This is something you have to test. On the one hand, you can read in the texts that this practice is good, that practice is good. You’re cutting away this or that defilement. But then you actually have to see if it works for you. Some people find that cutting back on sleep at night helps their practice. They meditate later into the night. Other people find that it doesn’t help at all. Actually, it goes in the other direction. You have to figure out what’s the right amount of sleep for you, based on trial and error. The same goes with your eating. How much food is too much? How much food is too little? There are no hard and fast rules here. Some people find that by setting a goal for the number of hours they’re going to meditate in the course of the day, it actually helps them push harder in their practice. For other people, you find they’re just putting in time. In which case, it’s better to focus on the quality and not so much measuring the number of hours you’re putting into formal practice, but how mindful you are as you walk around the monastery, how mindful you are as you do your chores, how mindful you are when you engage with other people. These things are individual matters. That’s the first step, is that you use your discernment to set your mind on a goal and to see if the means are appropriate. And you also want to see exactly what you’re up for, because an important part of the practice is learning how to pace yourself. I was talking today to someone who was complaining that he was trying to apply the Four Noble Truths to his daily life, and he was getting strung out, looking for the stress, and trying to analyze it, comprehend it, and figure out where the cause was. Well, that’s the case where he was missing the other Noble Truths, in particular, the path, trying to develop the qualities that put your mind in the right place where it actually can engage in this kind of analysis. The Buddha often talked about right concentration as food, food for the mind. It gives you the strength you need in order to do that kind of analysis. If you exercise a lot but you don’t feed yourself, the exercise is actually harmful. Instead of building up your strength, it wears it down. The same principle applies with the mind. The mind needs to be fed. So the discernment here is not only in the planning of what you’re going to determine, but also in the execution. If you make up your mind, you’re going to try to be more insightful into what’s going on in your mind. But you also have to realize that you have to feed the mind properly in order to engage in that kind of insight work. You have to learn how to pace yourself. So those are some of the things to think about as you try to use your discernment in deciding what kind of determination you’re going to make for the three months. Once you’ve used your discernment and made up your mind, the next step is to be true to it. In other words, be true to your promise to yourself that you are going to pursue that determination. This comes together with the third quality, which is relinquishment. In other words, anything that gets in the way of your determination, you’ve got to learn how to let it go. And let it go in a wise way. So you’ve made up your mind that you’re going to get up earlier in the morning to practice more. And pretty soon you’ll find yourself thinking, “Well, today I’m extra tired, so maybe I should sleep in a little bit.” But you can remind yourself all of it. If you really do need the extra sleep, you can sleep some other time. You’re awake right now. Ask yourself which part of the body is so heavy that you can’t get up. And then you test it. How about your arms? Can you get your arm up? Yes. Can you get your head up? You find yourself up. Then you can meditate. Think of that principle that the Buddha stated, that if you see that there’s a greater happiness that comes from abandoning the lesser happiness, be willing to abandon that lesser happiness. This is a lot of what the practice is. We’ve got little pleasures in the course of the day that actually get in the way of your meditation. You’ve got to learn the appropriate way of getting yourself around them. The Buddha once said, “This is a test of your discernment.” In other words, if you see something you like that leads only to a short-term happiness and actually gets in the way of a long-term happiness, how are you going to talk yourself into abandoning it? Or if there’s something you don’t like doing, but it will lead to a long-term happiness, how will you talk yourself into doing it? What strategies are you going to use with your mind? This is an important part of discernment, which many people miss. I think discernment is simply seeing things arising and passing away. But a lot of discernment lies in learning how to talk yourself into doing the things you know are right but you feel too lazy to do, or to talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do but you know are going to have bad consequences down the line. The fourth quality is calm. In other words, how to stick with your determination without getting strung out. How to let go of things you like without getting upset about it. Again, this involves using your discernment and learning how to encourage yourself. I’ve been talking recently about the book that’s come out called Punished by Rewards, which the basic thesis is that if teachers spend a lot of time rewarding kids for their behavior, it teaches the kids to be outer-directed rather than inner-directed. And if they’re totally outer-directed, then if they finally decide they don’t care what people think, then they totally lack inner-direction of a proper sort. So an important part of keeping yourself calm on the path is to learn to be inner-directed, to have a strong sense of your reasons for why you want to do this. You’re not trying to please somebody. You’re doing this because you see that you’re suffering and you want a way out. That motivation is perfectly good. It’s not selfish, it’s not small-minded. Because as you find that way out, one, you’re placing less of a burden on other people. Two, you’re actually an example for them. And also, as you find that way out, you’re ultimately taking yourself out of this feeding chain that we find ourselves in. So when you practice, it’s a gift both to yourself and to the people around you. But you have to learn how to internalize that realization and learn how to use it as you follow your determination. So even though you’re giving things up and you’re having to focus on a goal that’s down the line, remember, the path doesn’t save all those rewards for the goal. There’s the pleasure that comes in getting the mind to be concentrated. There’s the strength that comes in learning to be mindful and alert. There’s a sense of well-being that comes when you know that your behavior is not causing any harm to anybody. There’s nothing. You have to be ashamed of nothing. You have to go into denial. And as you learn how to develop a mature attitude to your goals, in other words, you realize there’s a lot that may still have to be done, but after all, you’re a human being. This applies to everybody. And so you learn to take comfort in the fact that at least you’re on a path that goes someplace. Most people’s lives are directionless. The Buddha compares them to a circle. It’s a stick thrown up in the air. When it comes down, sometimes it comes on this end, sometimes it falls down on that end, sometimes it falls splat in the middle. No real rhyme or reason. Think of all the people in the world who live their lives striving, striving, striving, and then having nothing to show for it. Because all their striving is focused on external things. But if you focus on developing good qualities in the mind, then it doesn’t really matter what the externals are like. You know when you’ve developed more mindfulness, more alertness, more compassion, more goodwill. You see them in your own heart, and you can feel the benefits that come. The improvement may be gradual, in which case it’s hard to see progress as it comes along. As the Buddha said, it’s like using an axe. You know that as you use the axe day after day after day, eventually the handle is going to wear through. But if you were to measure it from one day to the next, you can’t see exactly how much is worn away. But you know that ultimately, over time, that’s what happens. And so you give yourself encouragement along the way. Until the difference really does appear and it really is noticeable. So you notice that in all four of these factors—the discernment, the truthfulness, the relinquishment, and the calm—the discernment is really basic, because it not only helps you decide what goals you’re going to pursue and how you’re going to pursue them, but it helps you all along the way to make sure that the pursuit of the goal is what you want to pursue. So as you look forward to the next three months, try to use as much discernment as you can in getting the most out of them.

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