Four Determinations

July 21, 2024

Today marks the beginning of the rains retreat. Of course, we don’t have much rain this time of the year in California, but over in South and Southeast Asia, this is the time when the monsoons come. In the old days, people would complain if the monks were wandering around during that time. People had planted crops. The roots were muddy. They didn’t like the idea of people wandering around, potentially trampling over their crops. So the Buddha instituted this rains retreat, a time for the monks to stay in place, basically. We make a determination that we will stay here from now until the full moon in October. We dawn here every day. Unless you have pressing business, legitimate business, to be away. And even then, you can be away only for seven days at a stretch. It’s also a time for us to benefit from one another’s company, one another’s support in the practice. This is something we have to think a lot about, because all too often, living together, instead of being an aid to one another’s practice, we become obstacles. So we might want to think about how we can benefit from the knowledge of other people, the skills of other people, and how we can contribute to their practice as well. So in addition to determining that you’re going to stay here for three months, we can also think about what the Buddha had to say about determination. We’re determined, of course, on the end of suffering. We’re determined on the subduing of desire and passion. And determining on total freedom, determining on unbinding. The Buddha taught that we complete four determinations. The first is the determination for discernment, because the discernment that frees us from our defilements is the highest noble discernment. We’re determined on truth, because nirvana, what the Buddha calls the undeceptive, is the highest noble truth. The relinquishment of all our mental baggage, though again in the way of freedom, that’s the highest noble relinquishment. Then we’re determined on calm, because when the mind is freed from its defilements, it reaches the highest noble calm. So those are four aspects of where we’re going. We don’t wait, though, for them to appear at the end of the path. We develop them as we practice. So you can look at your practice right now. Where are you lacking in discernment? Where are you lacking in truthfulness? Where are you lacking in relinquishment? And where are you lacking in calm? Which of those is your weak point? What could you do to strengthen that? Because you want to bring all of them together. Because they do support one another. It’s our discernment that we realize, for instance, that relinquishment is not a deprivation. It’s a trade. You’re trading a lesser good for a greater good. Trading the things of the world for things of the mind. Discernment also helps with the quality of truth. Once you’ve made up your mind, you’re going to determine on something. You really have to stick with it. And you’re going to run into obstacles. As the Buddha said, there are four kinds of action in the world. The things that you would like to do and will give good results in the long term. The things you don’t like to do and will give bad results in the long term. Those don’t take much discernment. The things you like to do and give good results, you’ll do them, no problem. The things you don’t like to do and give bad results, no problem. The problem are the other two types. The things you like to do but you know will give bad results in the long term. And the things you don’t like to do but you know will give good results in the long term. He says right there, that’s a measure of your discernment. It’s how you can talk yourself into doing the things you don’t like to do but will give good results, and talk yourself out of doing things you like to do but will give long-term bad results. So you need that kind of discernment in order to stick with your determination. Discernment also helps with calm. Calm helps with discernment. Because when we discern what’s going on in our minds, we begin to see clearly what’s the disturbance in the mind. And the disturbance doesn’t come from outside. This is a tendency we all have, way too much to blame our problems on people outside, situations outside, the weather, whatever. But the whole point of the Buddhist teachings, the whole point of the Four Noble Truths, is that the cause for suffering is inside. The things outside are simply excuses. The real cause is our own clinging and craving, our desire and passion. So when you understand that, you look inside and you can see where you’re disturbing yourself. Or as the mind begins to settle down, you get used to being in a certain level of calm, you can begin to analyze that too. Because even in the highest states of concentration there is still some disturbance coming from within, which is why those states of concentration are not the ultimate. So you want to look for that. Get the mind really quiet, see where is there still a disturbance? What am I contributing to that? And sometimes it’s in the factors that got you concentrated to begin with, as with direct thought and evaluation. You have to think your way to get the mind to settle down with the breath. You adjust the breath to fit with the mind. You adjust the mind to fit with the breath. But there comes a point where you don’t have to adjust anymore. The fit is perfect, or the fit is good enough. But the mind feels at loose ends if it’s not going to be talking to itself. So you have to learn how to be with the state of mind where there’s just a perception holding you in place. That’s an example of what you can look for. As for calm helping with your discernment, the more still the mind is the more subtle things you’re going to see. So these four qualities, discernment, truth, relinquishment, calm, all work together. So look at your practice. Where is it lacking? For a lot of us it’s in the calm. But you also find there are a lot of things you’re not willing to relinquish. Look at the way you spend your time as you go through the day when you’re not really meditating. Why? Why can’t you let that go? The Buddha talks about wakefulness. He describes the ideal monk who sleeps only four hours a night. That’s a monk with no other responsibilities. But wakefulness doesn’t mean just sleeping a little bit. It also means as you go through the rest of the day you try to keep cleansing your mind. Of any qualities that act as obstructions. In other words, you want to be alert and awake all through the day to what’s going on in your mind. So to what extent are you not wakeful in the Buddha’s terms? Look at your life. Look at your practice. Think of that question the Buddha has you ask. Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now? What you’re becoming is dependent on what you’re doing. That’s the type of person you become. We all start out with bright hopes. Are your hopes still bright? If there’s any reason that they’re not, you have to ask yourself why. What are you lacking in terms of discernment, truth, relinquishment? And calm. And figure out what you can do for the reins to make up for that lack. It’s in this way that our time together becomes productive. We help one another on the path. We respect one another’s concentration. Working together becomes a source of joy and satisfaction. And that joy becomes another reason for getting the mind to settle down with a sense of contentment as being here. So you can focus on the area where the Buddha said you should be discontent with just the level of skillfulness in your mind. That you have the time and the energy and the opportunity to focus on wherever your skills are lacking. Try to develop them as far as you can.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240721_Four_Determinations.mp3>