Determined on Awakening

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Venerable Sariputta once characterized the Buddhist teachings in one sentence. He called it the subduing of desire and passion. The question is, what do you use to subdue desire and passion? And the answer is, you use desire. But it’s a special kind of desire. You have to look at your various desires and see where they lead you. Which ones lead to long-term happiness? Which ones lead to short-term? You give your preference to the ones that lead to long-term. And then you try to stick with that preference. The quality of sticking with a particular desire over other desires is called determination. When the Buddha discusses determination, it’s in the context of having succeeded at your determinations. There are four altogether. It’s discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm. He says when you reach Nibbana, the discernment that allows you to reach Nibbana, that’s the highest possible discernment. Nibbana itself is the highest possible truth, the highest noble truth. The letting go of all greed, passion, aversion, delusion. That’s the highest possible relinquishment. And of course, the calming of all the disturbances in the mind that comes with Nibbana. That’s the highest possible calm. So those are the things you are determined on. But you use those qualities as well. You have to develop them in order to get there. As he says, you learn how not to neglect discernment, how to guard the truth, how to train only for relinquishment and to, excuse me, how to be devoted to relinquishment, and how to train only for calm. And all the aspects of the path that we follow, virtue of concentration, discernment, all the qualities of mind we try to develop, the ways we live, trying to be modest, trying to be content, trying to find some seclusion, being unentangled. All of these are expressions of those four determinations. All of them advance those four determinations. So the Buddha is basically asking you to take on a training. This is what distinguished his teachings from the teachings of the other people at the time. You look in the Canon where they talk about the other teachings. They tend to be teachings about the nature of the world. Or about the nature of the self. In other words, a picture of reality. And all too often those pictures of reality would say, “Human action has no role at all.” Either the world is defined by forces that are totally impersonal, or action itself is unreal. The only things that are real are things that don’t change. Human morality is just a social convention. It has no basis in reality. So basically, your actions don’t mean anything. Some people like those ideas because it means that you can just do what you want without any fear of consequences. But the Buddha said if you believe things like that, you leave yourself unprotected. Urges come up in the mind, what do you do with them? You just have to give in. And then do suffer the consequences. Your actions do make a difference. That’s the basic teaching. Sometimes you hear that the Buddha didn’t go in for metaphysical truths. Well, one metaphysical truth he did go for was the fact that action is real. And you are responsible for your actions. Actions do have consequences, and you can learn from your actions and change them. So we’re training our desires. We’re using an overarching set of desires for truth, discernment, relinquishment, and calm to train all our other desires. For example, with virtue. You’re learning to be true to your precepts. The fact that you’re sticking with your precepts regardless of what the immediate consequences are. And there are cases where sticking to the precepts do put you at a disadvantage. You’re developing a quality of truth as you try to develop qualities like modesty, contentment, seclusion. Those give you practice in relinquishment and calm. Of course, concentration furthers training and calm. And it also gives training in discernment. ’Cause when you get the mind to settle down, you need to understand the mind to some extent. To know when it’s settling down, why it’s settling down. When it’s not settling down, why it’s not. You’re basically getting hands-on practice with the process that the Buddha calls fabrication. Well, he calls it sankhara. We translate it as fabrication. But in Dependent Core Arising, that’s the very first set of factors right after ignorance. We suffer because we fabricate our experience in ignorance. We get the raw material from our past actions, and we don’t experience it directly without processing it. Our processing in the present moment, that’s bodily fabrication, the way you breathe. Verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. And mental fabrication, the perceptions you hold in mind, the images, the words we assign identities to things and give meanings to things. And then your feelings, feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. When you do those things in ignorance, you’re gonna suffer. And the Buddhist teachings can be seen as recommendations on how to do those things with knowledge, even how to breathe. The Buddha tells you how to breathe. He tells you how to talk to yourself, for example, with contentment. You have to learn how to talk to yourself to actually be content with just the bare minimum. He has recommendations in the poetry, in the Sutta Nibbata, where he says, you tell yourself, today I got some alms, that was good. I didn’t get any alms, well, that’s good too. That’s the right attitude to have. As he says elsewhere, when you don’t get much food, you don’t have to spend all your time digesting. You’re not feeling sleepy. Okay, you’re more awake, you’re more alert. Some days when you go without, there’s an advantage to that too. You have to learn how to look for that, how to talk to yourself. That develops your discernment. With modesty, as the Buddha said, the things of the path, the results of the path, are so good that what point is there in telling anybody else? You may want to encourage them on the path themselves, but just to brag about what you have, the Buddha says, accomplishes nothing at all. Nobody else needs to know. And John Lee has a nice phrase, he says, “The things that other people know about are not safe.” Nobody else has to know about your attainments. Nobody else has to know about your powers of concentration, your discernment. When nobody else knows, you’re safe. So you can look at all the factors of the path, all the qualities we’re trying to develop, as ways of developing those four qualities of discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm. And when the Buddha says to not neglect discernment, he’s basically saying, look for the long-term. When you decide on an action, ask yourself, what will the long-term consequences be? This is so different from what you ordinarily hear, which is that Buddhism is all about being fully in the present moment. No thought of the past, no thought of the future. It’s being fully aware right here, right now. For him, discernment is a matter of looking at the long-term. He begins with that question, what, when I do it, will it be for my long-term harm and suffering? What, when I do it, will it be for my long-term welfare and happiness? It’s a long-term issue. To guard the truth, he says, means to be very clear about where you get your knowledge. And when you say things, be very clear about on what authority you’re speaking. Is it based on what you’ve heard or based on what you believe? Based on what you’ve read? Or based on what you’ve directly experienced? This is good when you’re talking to other people, but it’s also good when you’re talking to yourself. There’s so many things we believe 100%, but then when we realize, well, what is our belief based on? You begin to realize it’s not based on all that much. So that allows you to question a lot of your beliefs, especially the ones that are holding you back. Training and relinquishment, being devoted to relinquishment, means that you’re willing to give up whatever’s weighing you down. And it’s good to look at things in your life precisely in those terms. What is weighing the mind down? What is giving it unnecessary worries, unnecessary concerns? What’s holding you back? The mind does have this acquisitive tendency. I want to gather this, I want to gather that. And the desire for awakening, the desire to gain awakening, the Buddha does not discourage. But then the question is, to gain awakening, what else do you have to give up? Think about whatever’s getting in the way. This is where it’s good to realize when the Buddha’s talking, you see, he’s talking to monks. He’s talking to people who have given themselves totally to the practice. And so for them to give up, he’s recommending they give up a lot. Now, it is possible for laypeople to attain the Noble Attainments. And some people take that as an excuse, saying, well, the training for the monks is superfluous. The training for laypeople is all you need. But that wasn’t the Buddha’s attitude. It’d be like knowing that you can run a race by carrying extra weights. It would slow you down. But it’s good to know. What is it like not to have those weights? And you can ask yourself, what things are you actually holding onto that you really don’t need? This is where we practice modesty, where we practice contentment, where we try to find some seclusion, develops a style of life where we’re not entangled. And finally, training only for calm. Realizing, as the Buddha said, there is no happiness other than peace. The more calm you can find in the mind, the better. It’s good to learn how to appreciate calm. For so many people, calm is dull. Calm is boring. But as you practice concentration, as you practice all the various parts of the path, you do begin to realize, you do begin to appreciate that the mind at peace is the happy mind. And your standards for what counts as peace are going to grow higher and higher as you progress on the path. Many people are very happy to just get the mind to settle down, stop talking to itself, be quiet for a while. And for them, that’s pretty amazing. But then after a while, if you can maintain that state of mind, you begin to realize even there, there’s still a little bit of chatter. There’s still a little bit of disturbance going on in the mind. And you’re not being disturbed by things outside. It’s the mind’s activities itself. Can you let go of those activities? Usually they’re different perceptions you’re holding onto. You get the breath very refined, very refined. And then you can ask yourself, that perception you have that you have to breathe in and breathe out. To what extent can you let go of that perception? See what happens when the body is really, really still. You have the perception that the body is full of breath energy. You don’t need to take in anything from outside. That changes the dynamic. You can stay right there, very, very still. And then you can ask yourself, this sense I have of the body having a shape, having a boundary. To what extent is that necessary? And you find that your sense of the body turns into a cloud of little sensation dots, like the mist. You focus on the space between the dots. That’s even more calm. So what you’re doing, you’re refining your sense of what can be. It counts as calm, and that’s what you’re training for. To finally get to the point where you say, fabricating any state of mind at all, no matter how easeful, no matter how blissful, is work. Wouldn’t it be good to be able to let go of all that work? That’s when the mind inclines to something unfabricated. So it’s in this way that you develop those four qualities. The Buddha presents nibbana as being the embodiment of discernment, truth, relinquishment, calm. The highest expression of these things. But to get to the highest expression, you have to work with what you’ve got. And you use the different aspects of the path, training rules, the qualities of the character, which the Buddha recommends, the practice of concentration, discernment. All those practices strengthen these determinations and get them so strong that they finally can deliver you to their ultimate expression. So when you look at what the Buddha has to say about what we do in the practice, what we try to develop, always think of those four qualities. Discernment, truth, relinquishment, calm. And gain a sense of how whatever you’re doing is in line with those or is falling against them. If it’s falling against them, those are the kinds of desires and passions that have to be subdued. If you’re in line with them, you encourage them. So the Buddha’s approach is strategic. You use desire to overcome desire. It’s not all that mysterious or mystical. Think of that story of Ananda being in a park and a Brahmin comes to see him. He asks him, “What is this practice for?” Ananda says, “One of the things is that we learn to overcome desire.” And the Brahmin asks, “Well, how do you do that?” And Ananda lists the four bases for success. Desire, persistence, intent, your powers of analysis. And the Brahmin says, “That’d be impossible. How can you use desire to put an end to desire?” And Ananda points out a very simple response. He asks the Brahmin, “Before you came to this park, did you have the desire to come here?” “Well, yes.” “Now that you’re here, do you still have the desire?” “Well, no, it’s been satisfied.” So in the same way, we develop the determination, which is strong desire, overriding desire, to gain awakening. When we reach awakening, it’s not that we just decide we’re not going to have any desires anymore, we’re not going to have things different than they are. We reach awakening and that desire is actually satisfied. There’s nothing more satisfactory than nibbana.

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