Determination as a Perfection

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Determination is one of the perfections, as is equanimity. The question is how to put the two of them together. It’s less of a problem than you might think. The problem comes from a misunderstanding. We think equanimity means not wanting things to be different from the way they are. In fact, sometimes that’s given as the definition of suffering, or the cause of suffering. It’s wanting things to be different from where they are. But the Buddha never said that. He said there are three specific kinds of craving that cause suffering—craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming, which is to destroy whatever states of becoming you may be experiencing. But there are other desires that don’t fall under those three. And those are the desires that we can work with. Also, the way equanimity is expressed. It’s not that you’re just okay with whatever comes up. You’re thinking about the principle of karma. The beings are going to be happy or miserable based on their karma. The karma doesn’t have you just stop right there. It’s not the case that what you experience in the present moment is not governed by your present actions. You don’t abdicate your responsibility right now. If you believe that everything you experience right now comes from something else, what are the alternatives? Either it’s the Creator God, or your past karma, or serendipity—no real cause at all, all of which are severe forms of wrong view. If you really think about the principle of karma the way the Buddha taught it, you’ve got the raw material coming in from the past. You’ve got your past actions. But you have a range of choice as to what you’re going to do with that raw material. It’s like being a carpenter with a pile of wood. You think about what you can make out of that pile of wood. You don’t just let the pile of wood sit there. You do something with it. Now there may be some constraints. The pieces may be irregularly cut. Some of the wood may be rotten. But if you’re a good carpenter, you can figure out what you can make out of what you cut. And that type of ingenuity, that level of skill, is something we’re trying to develop as we meditate. And this is what we get determined on. We want to develop the skill so that we can figure out what is the most skillful thing to do at any one time. That’s what we determine on. That’s our vow. Because we know that that will take us someplace good. That, too, comes from a reflection on the principle of karma. So equanimity doesn’t prevent you from wanting things to be different. It’s more a matter of realizing what limitations you’ve got, accepting those, but then seeing that there is range for change in what you’ve got. It’s like accepting responsibility for the fact that you are shaping things right now. You want to shape them in a good direction. You look at the stories of the Ajahns. Ajahn Lee and Ajahn Mahaprabhu talked about how much taking and making vows played a part in their practice. That’s a type of determination. They set their hearts on something and they wanted to follow through. Determination is basically focused desire. You make up your mind that one desire is going to be paramount, and then you have to fight off all your other desires that would get in the way. So in this case, equanimity is equanimity of a soldier. There’s a battle that has to be done. You’re battling your defilements. And although you have to accept the fact that they are defilements, that doesn’t mean you accept the fact that you’re going to keep on living with them. Because the principle of karma is such that you can make changes. As the Buddha said, people couldn’t abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful qualities. And if they wouldn’t benefit from both of those actions, he wouldn’t have taught. We can’t change. That’s why it’s worthwhile to teach. That’s why it’s worthwhile to practice. Look at the verb that’s used with regard to the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors for awakening, and the unbelievable path. It’s too develop, to bring into being. Now, that may require a certain amount of becoming, and it involves some craving for becoming, but it’s used for a skillful purpose. So think about what you really want in life. That’s what determination is all about. You’ve got this power of action. You’ve got these possibilities. Where do you want to focus them? One of the things the Buddha recommends is focusing them on goodwill. Goodwill, he says, is a determination, and it’s another one of the perfections. So you think about what that means. How do you perfect goodwill? You’re trying to get very clear about what it means to wish happiness for others. You wish happiness for yourself. And here again you run into the principle of karma. People are going to be happy because of their actions. You’re going to be happy because of your actions. So you’re wishing that beings act in skillful ways. You wish that you yourself can act in skillful ways. So if you have anything unskillful in your character, anything that would get in the way of true happiness, you have to ask yourself, “Why do I continue to hold on to this?” How can I figure out how to let go? That requires thought. It requires ingenuity, all of which are part of the meditation. Here again we run up against a common misunderstanding that we shouldn’t be thinking while we meditate. We shouldn’t be using our powers of imagination. We should simply be noting what’s there. And although alertness is one of the qualities you bring to the meditation, it’s not the only one. Hardness, mindfulness, these play a role as well. And the mindfulness is there to remind you, “This is what’s worked in the past. This is what hasn’t worked in the past. This is what’s coming in the present moment.” That’s true. It reminds you how to recognize what’s actually coming up in the present moment. Ardency is the desire to do this well. When you look at the three qualities that go into mindfulness practice—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—the ardency is what really makes a difference. Because mindfulness can be mindfulness of anything. You can remember anything. With alertness, you can be alert to anything you’re doing. The way those terms are defined, there’s nothing necessarily skillful about them. But with ardency, you realize that if you don’t develop skillful qualities, you’re going to suffer. So that’s your impetus. And that’s what should get you thinking. What are the options available to you right now? Which would be the most skillful one? How can you motivate yourself to keep going for the more skillful one? If you really wish yourself well, that’s the direction you should go. And part of the mind will say, “Well, this being a little bit too tough, being too stringent, don’t push me so fast. But then how much time do we have?” I was talking today to someone who’s had cancer for a long time, but it’s been always in the background. It was very slow-growing cancer. And now all of a sudden it’s taken an aggressive turn. And the treatment is doing things to his body. They’re the kinds of things you would never wish to have done to your body. But you can’t choose when you go, how you go, how long it’s going to take. When you learn about cases like this, you have to reflect, “This could happen to me as well. Am I ready? Could I handle that?” It’s not an act of kindness to say, “Well, let’s take the progress slowly, bit by bit.” I mean, there is a bit-by-bit quality to the practice, but it should be bit by bit by bit by bit by bit. Otherwise you keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. It’s always the same question. What’s the most skillful thing to do or say or think right now? And try to incline your mind to what seems most skillful. Sometimes it’ll require you to sacrifice certain things that part of the mind holds dearly. This is where the ingenuity comes in to figure out how you can get that part of the mind to let go, so you can put your whole heart, your whole mind, into this. It’s in this way that the perfections reinforce one another. Determination, goodwill, equanimity. Just three examples. Of course, persistence plays a role there as well. And truth. Once you’ve made up your mind, you want to find happiness, and you try to be true to that desire. So it’s in this way that the perfections develop. They coalesce. They develop momentum. They inform one another. So when you look at the pile of wood you’ve got, and the pile will change day by day. Sometimes it can change very quickly. But you want to get to the point where you can be confident that whatever is available, you make something good out of it. Whatever the restrictions that come in from your past actions, you’ll be able to make up for the lack. And you have the confidence that you can stick with that determination. That’s when you begin to have refuge inside, right where it’s most needed.

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