

Single-minded Determination

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We're here for the sake of true happiness.

That's why the Buddha left his palace and went out into the wilderness. He wasn't satisfied with the happiness that comes in normal, everyday life. He wanted a happiness that was dependable, a happiness really worth all the effort that would go into it. All kinds of happiness require effort in one way or another. The question is, "Is the effort worth it?" In terms of fabricated things, conditioned things, many times the answer is No. In fact, if you make any conditioned thing an end in and of itself, the effort isn't worth it, for ultimately it will leave you high and dry.

Yet the Buddha realized that conditioned things have another side as well. Not only are they conditioned, they're also conditioning. In other words, as conditioned things they're dependent on other causes; they arise and fall in line with those causes' arising and falling away — sometimes immediately, sometimes over time. But then they themselves give rise to other things. The Buddha's major discovery was that even though certain things are conditioned — in other words the elements of the path are conditioned — they can lead to an opening to the Unconditioned. And this is what makes the path worthwhile, what gives hope to our lives.

In Thai there's a term for the state of mind where all you can see is the bad side of conditioned things: Everything passes away, passes away, passes away, and everything starts seeming hopeless, pointless. It's called narrow equanimity, small minded equanimity. In other words, you get disenchanted with everything, but the disenchantment doesn't lead to the opening to the Deathless. You stay stuck there on the disenchanted side. If you stay stuck there, it's easy to get hopeless, apathetic, depressed.

But the Buddha pointed out another side to conditioned things, too. A potential for true happiness lies here in the practice. We're fabricating conditioned things. Right View, Right Resolve, all the way down to Right Concentration: These are all conditioned things. They're the highest of all conditioned things. But even though they're the highest, you don't stop there. They're a path. They open up to something even bigger.

So make sure that you look at life from both sides. In other words, you're focused on the drawbacks of taking conditioned things as your goal *so that you*

don't get complacent. Sometimes it's easy: You get a nice, calm state in meditation, life around you seems pretty effortless, and it's very tempting—and this happens to many, many meditators—to say that this is fine enough right here. It's in cases like that that the Buddha points out all the drawbacks of conditioned things, all the drawbacks of conditioned happiness. Not only is a lot of effort wasted in creating that happiness, but sometimes in order to maintain it you also start doing things that go against the precepts, that go against the principles of morality, concentration, and discernment, so that your conditioned happiness causes suffering not only in passing away but also in leading to all kinds of bad things down the road. So you have to watch out. You can't be complacent.

On the other side, the Buddha emphasizes the fact that heedfulness really does pay off. If everything were negative, then no matter how heedful or careful you might be then there'd be no chance for any true happiness. But skillful action does pay off. That's why heedfulness is so important. If you're careful, if you're circumspect, it'll make a big difference.

So we have to ask ourselves, What kind of happiness are we going to pursue in our lives? And we have to be single-minded in the practice, because it's so easy to stray off in other directions. Some of the side roads are blatantly bad, and others are relatively good. With the good ones, it's easy to talk yourself into saying, "Well, this is a good thing to do. There's nothing wrong with doing this." In a general sense, yes, that may be right. But if it's second best, if it's not all the way to the Unconditioned, you can't let yourself stop there. You can't turn off the road there. You've got to be careful to stay on course.

The problem is that we come to the practice with many minds. We don't have any single-minded determination. Ajaan Mun in his last Dhamma talk referred to single-mindedness as being the essential element in the practice: the single-minded determination not to come back and let the defilements step all over you as before—the determination not to come back to suffering. But that determination is something that we have to develop over time. We don't come into the practice this way. We start out with two or three minds about the whole thing.

This is what training the mind is all about: getting the mind to gather around that single-minded purpose, that single-minded intention. This kind of training starts with the precepts. They show us exactly where our minds are many-minded. When you observe the precepts, you have to focus on your intentions all the time. As you get to know your intentions, you begin to realize that the mind is like a committee. Sometimes it's not just a committee—it's a whole crowd.

Even concentration is not the kind of single-mindedness we're talking about, but it's a basic prerequisite. It's part of the training that takes you there. We take one intention and run with it as far as we can in the face of the inevitable

contrary intentions that counteract it. In the beginning, the intention to stay with the breath, to stay with the meditation, is bound to be weak, and it's easy to get knocked off course. But as you begin to feel at home here, at ease here, you grow more resistant to getting knocked off because you don't want to leave what you've got. This feels like the right place to be.

Then you can start taking on the more deep-rooted intentions that come your way. You take them apart to understand, "Why do they seem to have such force?" You overcome distraction, you overcome the defilements of the mind not by pushing them away and pretending they're not there, but by understanding them—and "understanding" means the ability to watch them from a good solid standpoint. That's what concentration is for. As things keep coming up, you realize, "*This* isn't really an intention I want to abide by, and *that's* not, either." So you cut them away, cut them away, until you run into the really big defilements, the really important ones. Sometimes they'll knock you off base again, which is a sign that your concentration and insight need further development.

The path of practice is not a smooth straight line on a graph. It has its ups and downs. It has its drama. As you learn in any writing class, one of the basic principles of story construction is that a story has to have setbacks in order to be interesting, in order to be realistic. In the same way, the story of your practice of the Dhamma is bound to have setbacks—the difference being that you're not reading it, you're living it, and many times you'd rather not experience the interesting setbacks. But keep reminding yourself of why you're here. You're here for true happiness, genuine happiness, a happiness that's not going to let you down, a happiness that's going to be worth all the ups and downs that go into finding it.

When you look at all the other happinesses you gain from getting off the path, you see that they all let you down in one way or another. This realization helps pull you back on the path, so that ultimately you can start cutting through the big distractions, the big defilements. But whether the defilements are big or small, they require a similar practice, a similar technique: You see where there's stress, you see what you're doing to cause that stress, and you see that you don't have to do that—you can stop, you can let it go. This is the basic pattern. It's simply that with stronger powers of concentration, stronger mindfulness, stronger alertness, you can cut through things that you couldn't cut through before.

Over time, that single-minded determination not to let yourself suffer gets stronger and stronger, plays a larger and larger role in the committee discussions until finally it's *the* voice, the unanimous voice in the mind. All the other voices have been eliminated. Either that or they've been converted. But even when there

are still a few traitorous voices lurking in the background, remember that the important voice is this one, the one resolved not to stop short of genuine happiness. Try to strengthen that voice as much as you can, because that's the voice that saw the Buddha through. Look at all the setbacks he encountered in his practice: finding teachers and then realizing that they couldn't take him all the way; going as far as austerities could take him, and then realizing that that didn't go all the way either. And then he was stuck. He had tried all the alternatives that had been suggested in his culture, and they hadn't worked. But he was determined not to give up. That's what saw him through to Awakening. Whatever there is of that determination in you is what's going to give you the strength to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on going. So make sure that that determination stays nurtured, for that's what'll see you through.