

Determined on Goodwill

April 22, 2012

We had a commemoration for Ajaan Lee this morning. It's been 51 years since he passed away. When you read his autobiography, you get a very strong sense of how much determination he put into his practice. The Pali term *adhitthana*, determination, is one of the *paramis*, one of the perfections we try to develop. In other words, it's the element of willpower you put into the practice.

You really have to make up your mind that this is what you want to do. This is where you want to go. Of course, once you make up your mind like that, there are going to be obstacles both inside and out. But that shouldn't be reason to shrink away from your determination. What it means is that you have to learn how to use your discernment. In fact, in one of the canonical descriptions of *adhitthana* or determination, discernment comes first.

You use your discernment both in your choice of the goal you want to attain and in the means by which you're going to go about it—how you can get there—which means that when things are easy, you keep right on the path. When things are difficult, you try to keep right on the path, but it takes discernment to figure out how to get around the obstacles.

An important element of discernment is not just figuring things out, but also understanding how to carry out your determination. Remember the discernment part of the path is not only right view, but also right resolve: resolve on renouncing sensuality and resolve on renouncing ill will and harmfulness. The element of resolve there is a very important one.

There's a passage in the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* we chanted just now of being resolved on this mindfulness of goodwill for all. When you're working on this path, it can't be simply out of disgust for the world or anger at people who've been difficult. It has to come out of goodwill. You try to nurture that quality in your mind at the same time that you make the determination that you really do want to find a way out. It helps protect you from the unskillful things that may be hiding in your determination.

I've often said that the mind is like a committee. Sometimes the good members are working on something, and some unskillful members sneak in. All of a sudden, you find that the task you had assigned to the good member gets taken over by somebody else. This is why the Buddha says you have to be determined on this mindfulness, keeping in mind the quality of goodwill for all beings as your underlying motivation.

Now, having goodwill for others doesn't mean that you always do what they want. It's important to realize that there's a distinction between harming others and hurting their feelings. If hurting their feelings were harming them, then people would have ways of blackmailing you with their emotions. You have to look at if you're harming them in ways that really would cause damage to their spiritual well-being, and that's something else. On the common level, you don't break the precepts around these other people. At a deeper level, you have a sense of what's really good for them and what's really good for you.

Remember, we're looking here for a happiness that's not just happiness for us, but well-being—a sense of inner happiness that's in line with other people's inner happiness, too. Remember the image of the acrobats. One acrobat stands on the shoulders of the other one. Each one has to look after his or her balance. If you're worried about the other acrobat, you're going to lose your balance, fall down, and pull both of you down.

So as the Buddha said, there are times when if you look after yourself skillfully, you're looking after others skillfully as well. If you look after others skillfully, you're going to be looking after yourself skillfully. That possibility's always there. Your determination helps you find it. Make up your mind: "I want to find a happiness that's not going to harm anybody else." And you put your mind to it; you put your heart to it. It's when you're focused on something like that that opportunities appear.

All too often, we use that quality of determination for unskillful things—trying to figure out how we can get money out of a situation or, say, with alcoholics, how they can get some alcohol out of a situation. The force of their determination actually opens up opportunities that might not have been there before. But of course, those opportunities are not going to be helpful at all. What we have to learn how to do is bring that same focus to a happiness that's good for us and good for others.

So when we talk about basing our determination on discernment, we have to include that quality of goodwill as well. We open our minds to the possibility that there may be opportunities in our lives that we hadn't thought of before, or hadn't noticed before, for giving ourselves space to practice that, at the same time, are being a help to others.

Once you've made up your mind in that direction, you have to be true to it. That's the second quality in determination. Now, with some determinations, you begin to realize that you weren't all that wise in your decision, or you weren't all that understanding in how you formulated your idea about where you wanted to go. At the very least, with the pursuit of the end of suffering, it is a wise goal. But

you'll find as you work on the path that your concept of where you're going, and how you're going to go there, will have to grow and develop. So this element of truthfulness is not only just a matter of sticking to your original ideas. It means sticking to your original goal but trying to be sensitive to what needs to be changed as you get a better sense of the goal. Again, that's where discernment comes in. When setbacks come, you have to learn how to deal with them and not lose heart.

The third quality is relinquishment—in other words, the things you're going to have to give up. You learn how to give them up with good grace. But there are some things you don't give up. The Buddha talks about when you're helping others, you don't want to break the precepts. In other words, your virtue is not something you'd give up. Even if it may help other people, the Buddha said that's not in the long run going to be helping anybody.

Finally, there's peace. This is not just the peace of having attained the goal you want, but also of learning to keep your mind calm and unruffled as you pursue your goal. Otherwise, how are you going to see those opportunities that allow you to make your way to the goal through all the difficulties, through all the obstacles? Whatever comes up, you have to remind yourself: Stay calm. There's a way out of this. Even if death comes, there's a way that you don't have to suffer—to say nothing of the lesser obstacles in life.

The Buddha never promised that this was going to be an easy path. But he did say that if you set your mind on it, it's possible. And he gave all kinds of encouragement. There's one passage where one of his relatives is getting discouraged in the path. The Buddha says, "Look, everything you need is here. It's just that at the moment you don't see it."

So take heart. This is not an impossible path. If it were, the Buddha wouldn't have taught it. He said if it weren't possible to develop skillful qualities, he wouldn't have taught people to develop them. If it weren't possible to abandon unskillful qualities, he wouldn't have taught to abandon them. Everything he teaches is a possibility.

Now, the speed with which we're going to practice and develop those possibilities depends on our own actions, our own choices. But if you make up your mind that this is what you really want—and base that decision on goodwill for all—you're sure to find your way through.