

Four Determinations

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Your practice doesn't come together simply because causes and conditions happen to be that way. There's something inside you that has to *want* it to happen and to *make* it happen.

You look at the images the Buddha gives for people who do the practice: people who are searching for something; people who are struggling, fighting in battles; people who are being trained in skills. All of these activities require an element of will.

The term for will in Pali is *adhiṭṭhāna*—determination—and there are four determinations that are really helpful for the practice. It's good to keep them in mind.

The first, the Buddha says, is “not to neglect discernment.” What does it mean to neglect discernment? It implies that you have some discernment already, but you're not paying attention to it.

Remember that the basic principle of discernment is that you look at your actions to see which of your actions lead to long-term welfare and happiness, and which ones lead in another direction. Then, “not to neglect discernment” means that you actually promote the ones that lead to long-term happiness.

That's why the Buddha said one of the measures of your discernment is when you see there's something you don't like to do but you know is going to give good results—happiness in the long-run—you're able to talk yourself into wanting to do it. You're not just forcing yourself. You're giving yourself reasons. You see why it would be a good thing to be more generous, to be more virtuous, to meditate more, realizing that these things really are for your benefit. *All* the aspects of the training are there for your benefit.

This is probably why that Zen master said that “The Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences.” He wasn't saying that you don't prefer the end of suffering to suffering. You do prefer the end of suffering. It's simply that you look at what's required to put an end to suffering and see that some things will be difficult, but you don't let your preferences get in the way. You're willing to do whatever is needed to be done.

This is in line with one of the meanings of the principle of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. We're not here to change the Dhamma or to update it. The Dhamma is timeless, as we chant almost every day: It's *akāliko*. There's nothing in the Dhamma that needs to be changed. What

needs to be changed is in us. So when you're willing to make those changes, that's what it means to not neglect discernment.

The second determination is to guard the truth. Now, this has a particular meaning in the Pali Canon. It means that you're very careful to be alert to where you get your knowledge. When you have a certain opinion, where did it come from? And why are you holding to it? When you're careful about this, you realize how little you really know and, when you're taking on the path, how much you actually take on conviction. That also means that if you're operating on conviction, what can you do to confirm it? You may like something because it seems reasonable, but the Buddha said that that's not proof that it's actually true.

A while back I was getting emails from someone who said that because the commentaries come from an unbroken tradition, we have to accept them. Well, as the Buddha himself said, just because something comes from an unbroken tradition doesn't mean it's true. A tradition is no stronger than its weakest link. What the tradition teaches might fit in with your ideas about what you think you already know, but that, too, isn't proof that it's really true.

This principle reminds you that you're going to have to test things. What method of proof does the Buddha's recommend? You actually take on a teaching, you put it into practice, and you see what results you get. If something leads you to act in ways that lead to long-term welfare and happiness in line with the principles of discernment, okay, then you know you've got something true. If your actions lead to long-term harm and suffering, the teaching that inspires them is false.

So, you have to put things to the test if you want to guard the truth. That means putting yourself to the test as well, because your powers of judgment can be skewed. I know a large number of people who say, "Well, I've tried mindfulness practice, and it doesn't really do much for me, so there must be nothing there." But exactly how did they do it? How much did they do it? How committed were they to doing it? How did they guard the truthfulness of their own actions? That's the big question right there.

So, when you test the Buddha's teachings, you're going to be testing yourself. This test will make demands in terms of how much mindfulness you develop, how much alertness you develop, and how much ardency.

When Ajaan Lee discusses those three qualities that you bring to mindfulness practice, when the question comes as to which of them embodies discernment, he says it's the ardency. Again, this would be another meaning for not neglecting discernment—that you're really ardent in testing things. You're really ardent in testing yourself, so that you really come to the truth.

Look at the Buddha and all that he went through in order to find the truth. Even when he gained awakening, he tested it from various angles, to make sure it constituted real awakening. When he found that, no matter which angle you looked at it from, it constituted genuine knowledge, genuine freedom, only then did he teach.

So, he guarded the truth, one, inside, by being clear about where he was basing his knowledge; and then, two, doing what he could to develop his mind in such a way that he could actually see from his own experience what was true and what was not—particularly with regard to the issue of putting an end to suffering.

The third determination is to be devoted to relinquishment. The Pali word for relinquishment—*cāga*—can mean anything from giving a gift to giving up your defilements. You’re learning how to let go from the very beginning of the practice, and you keep letting go in deeper and deeper ways. That’s how you’re devoted to it, committed to it.

Now, there are times when we let go because we know we *should* let go, but there’ll be part of the mind that’s ready to take it back. As one of Ajaan Lee’s students once said, “It’s like holding something in your hand and then putting it down, but leaving your hand on top of it so that you can pick it up whenever you want to again.” That’s how most of us let go.

But, as the Buddha said, you have to really understand things if you’re going to let them go properly. And he gives five steps: If there’s something in the mind that you know is unskillful—watch it. See when it comes and look for what the Buddha calls its *origination*.

Now, when he uses the word origination, it means two things: One, you’re looking for the cause—not simply for the fact that it arises, but, what’s causing it to arise? What arises together with it? And two, nine times out of ten when the Buddha talks about origination, he’s talking about causes coming from within the mind. What inside the mind is sparking this? How long does it last? Because that’s the next step you want to see: when it passes away. When you see that the origination passes away, and then this particular defilement passes away, then you really see, “Okay, there is a connection.”

So, what is it about the cause that attracts you? That’s the third step: What’s the allure? Where is that particular desire focused?

As the Buddha notes: The desire can be focused on almost anything. You think you desire a person, but often it’s not the person you desire. You desire a certain perception around the person.

Or you desire a certain status: Like that old commercial about the BMW chill. A guy comes up to the top of a parking garage, he steps out the door of the

elevator, sees his BMW in the midst of all these other old jalopies, and he just shivers, because it's *his* BMW.

In that case, the status there is where the allure lies. It's not in the car itself, it's in what it means, what it says about you. That's what they're trying to sell you. This is how a lot of advertising works. And your mind does that to you, too. So you have to see exactly: Where is the allure?

Often it can be hidden, especially if it's something you're not especially proud of. So you have to dig down—what is it that you like about that particular defilement?

Then, in the fourth step, you compare the allure with the drawbacks. If you go for that particular defilement, what's going to happen? Here again, you have to bring in your discernment. This is where the teachings on the three perceptions come in: Whatever pleasure you get out of this, it's going to be inconstant, stressful, not-self. I.e., it's not worth holding on to as your own. That teaching on not-self is really a value judgment, meant to lead to a deeper value judgment, so that you can say, "This is really not worth it."

That gets you to the fifth stage in letting go, which is developing dispassion for what you used to have passion for—and that's the escape.

So, that's how you're devoted to relinquishment. You don't let go just because you're supposed to. You let go because you see there's really no good reason to hold on.

And you have to let go at the right time. There are certain things in the path that you have to hold on to in order to get to the end of the path. Think of the raft that takes you across the river. If you let go of the raft in the middle of the river, you drown. You hold on to the raft until it's taken you across—*then* you let go.

In other words, the path has to do its work, and you have to do the work of the path in order to really understand why something is really worth letting go. That's being devoted to relinquishment.

And finally, the fourth determination is to train only for calm. Of course, the whole path here is a training: heightened virtue, heightened mind, heightened discernment. It's all for the calm of nibbāna.

Now, in the factors for awakening, where some of the factors for awakening are energizing and some are calm, you energize the body and the mind first. If you start out saying, "I'll just calm things down," sometimes you put yourself to sleep. So you learn how to energize yourself by the way you breathe, by the way you think—*then* you calm things down.

This is why, in the breath meditation instructions, you're taught to energize yourself, and then calm bodily fabrication, eventually to the point where the breath stops. You energize yourself with rapture and feelings of pleasure, and then you calm mental fabrication even to the point where perceptions and feelings stop. That's the direction we're headed.

Now, you don't just suppress these things. You have to calm things down through understanding. In other words, you're practicing calm and insight together. The insight comes in seeing things in terms of fabrication. When the calm is informed by insight, that's when it's genuine. So here, too, discernment has to play a role in getting you to understand where you're not calm and why.

Those, then are the four determinations: not neglecting discernment, guarding the truth, being devoted to relinquishment, and training only for calm. These are the determinations that keep you on track. After all, the path has to come out of desire, and the problem with desire is that there's not just one desire in your mind—there are many desires. As we get on the path, what makes it a path is the fact that we clear the way by saying, "This desire for the end of suffering is going to be the desire that takes over. This is going to be the *master* desire."

You do that through determination. Determination is what establishes clear priorities for your desires, and imposes itself on any desires that don't fall in line. So, your determination for discernment, truth, relinquishment, calm: You're determined for those to have priority over whatever other desires may come sloshing up around them in your mind.

As when you're doing concentration practice: It's not the case that you just sit here and wait for concentration to come, or hope that concentration will come—that somehow your past karma will do it for you. As the Buddha said, what you experience right now is the result of past karma together with present karma. And it's the present karma that makes it possible for you to experience it at all.

Which means: On the one hand you can manipulate things right now, but also if you learn how to calm down the processes of fabrication here in the present moment, it can open up to something that's not caused. That's the calm we're aiming at. That's the truth and the relinquishment we're aiming at—through our discernment. All four of the determinations involve discernment.

So keep this point uppermost in mind. The path isn't going to happen on its own. You have to make it happen and you have to overcome a lot of other desires that go in other directions. Give the desire for the path top priority. That's when you're discerning, and that's when you're practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

It's all for the sake of disenchantment: the insight that sees how the other things you've been going for are really not worth it—you've had enough.

In the words of the forest ajaans, you've grown up. You've become sober after having been intoxicated. And you get there, you grow up, by using your discernment, by being true, by letting go, and by training only for calm. Give those determinations top priority—and see how far they can take you.