Goals in Meditation: Commitment to Enlightenment

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Commitment to Enlightenment

I think it's important to consider what we want in our spiritual lives, because what we want is what we tend to move toward.

In insight meditation groups, we tend not to encourage a lot of specific goal setting because people can very easily slide into the more common worldly patterns of trying to envision what we want and making it happen—grasping after some kind of future experience that we've already imagined, already conceived of. We might expect some specific spiritual gain or then start to compare where we're at with where we think we should be. And usually our timeline of development is rather unrealistic. It backfires. If we get involved in comparing, it backfires, and we end up discouraged, we end up judging ourselves, we end up doubting our practice.

But it is possible to reflect upon our commitments, to reflect upon our aspirations, without fueling insecurity, without it leading to doubt and comparing and conceit and envy. We can nurture instead an energetic inspiration by reflecting upon the noble aims—perhaps an aim of awakening, awakening from the patterns of ignorance, purifying the heart from greed, hate, and delusion, ending chronic misperceptions that create a kind of resistance to how things actually are in our lives. Or just having the inspiration to continue to learn, to continue to grow, to continue to improve our experience and ourselves and the way we meet life, so that we meet it with an increasing sense of virtue and clarity and mindfulness and wisdom.

The Buddha described the aim of practice in a number of different discourses and in a number of different ways of saying what the purpose of his teachings were. In one discourse, the Middle Length Discourse Sutta number 29, called the Simile of the Heartwood, he uses a simile that describes a story where somebody needs heartwood. They need that strong inner wood in order to make a chair or a table or a bench or a pillar or a post. And so this person who needs the heartwood goes into the forest in search of heartwood and comes to a tree that actually possesses heartwood. But that person really doesn't know what heartwood is. And so they get excited that they found this tree and they leave with the twigs and the leaves.

Another person comes, also seeking heartwood to do a building project, and they find a tree that has heartwood, but they also don't know what it is, so they leave carrying away only the branches. Another

person looking for heartwood does the same thing but leaves carrying away the bark, and another one takes only the soft inner wood. Each of these people needs heartwood, and they feel pleased with what they've found because they believe that their purpose has been fulfilled. In fact, they praise themselves for their discoveries and for their attainments of these twigs and these branches and this bark. And then they disparage others. It is said they become intoxicated with their gains, their attainments, and grow negligent. But because they didn't know the aim, they didn't actually know what the heartwood was—though they're unaware of this—their purpose is not going to be fulfilled.

This simile is used to describe the many valuable things that happen in the course of our spiritual practice. In this discourse, the Buddha then goes on to describe four things that are gained in the course of our practice but should not be mistaken for the goal, and a fifth thing that is considered the noble aim and the heartwood of the path.

He considers first popularity, fame, a sense of gaining prestige or social respectability, and he does not praise this. Yes, it happens, but he does not praise it at all. Then there are three things that he praises: virtue, concentration, and knowledge and vision. These are attainments that develop in the course of our practice. They happen, and they're praiseworthy. And then there's the fifth, which is the final—what's called the perpetual liberation that does not fall away.

The simile of the heartwood reminds us to reflect upon what our aims for practice are and what is the highest aim, what is the heartwood of the path, so that we won't be satisfied with deceptive attainments, even praiseworthy accomplishments that develop in the course of our mindfulness training and our meditative development.

When we are engaged in a sincere and deep meditation practice, we're going to encounter periodically some very lovely experiences. We might experience some joy and bliss, some calmness and tranquility. Perhaps the mind might become luminous and bright, flexible and wieldy. We might experience very refined states of concentration or deep states of clarity and wisdom. These are great. Don't complain if they occur. You don't need to fear them. You don't need to avoid them. You don't need to resist them. But they're not the heartwood. They're not the aim. They're not the ultimate goal of this path.

In the Visuddhimagga, a fifth-century meditation manual, we find a very important list of ten corruptions of insight. These corruptions of insight occur very naturally in the course of our meditation practice and become impediments only if they are mistaken for the goal, only if we become attached to them and therefore stop short of the heartwood. These corruptions of insight include light and luminosity of the mind, a radiance of mind. The second is knowledge of matter and mind—to really have a very clear, vivid, and genuine understanding of the nature of body and mind. The third is rapturous bliss, happiness, joy. The fourth is tranquility.

The fifth is pleasure and happiness. The sixth is resolution or determination. The seventh is exertion—right striving, right effort. The eighth is mindfulness. And the ninth is equanimity.

They don't really sound like impediments to the path, do they? In a way, these are the things that we are cultivating. These are practices that we nurture—certainly mindfulness, equanimity, energy, resolution, joy, tranquility, and knowledge of matter and mind. What's corrupt about these?

Well, it's the tenth that tells us. The tenth item is attachment. And if we are attached to any of these, then it will become an impediment to the development of our practice. It will prevent us from reaching the ultimate goal of realization.

Not all of these experiences are going to occur for every meditator, but this list of nine items does describe the kind of positive experiences that can arise in our practice and have the potential to distort our perception of the path if we neglect to see them as conditioned, as impermanent, as not I, not me, and not mine.

Just as a villager who goes into the forest looking for heartwood would be more successful if that villager knew what heartwood was—at least knew some of the defining features of it, or what it wasn't—as we explore the depths of our minds, as we explore how we encounter experience, how perception operates, we could benefit by having a sense of what we're looking for. We could benefit from an understanding of what the Buddha was teaching, of what he was teaching for, of the purpose that motivated his ministry.

So we can first reflect individually: What are we seeking? What brought you here tonight? What brings you to your meditation seat? What inspires you to pick up a Dharma book instead of a comic book? What are you interested in developing? What are your goals?

Are you committed to enlightenment? To inner peace? To wisdom? To calmness? To living with greater love and compassion? To being more present for the encounters that you experience in a day? What motivates your practice? What do you want?

One of the classic definitions of enlightenment is the ending of greed, hate, and delusion. Does that motivate your practice? Is that something that you want? Are you committed to putting an end to the movements of greed and hate and delusion as they arise within your own mind and your own life? How strong is that commitment?

I think these are very noble goals. They require dedication, they require effort, they require earnestness. The Buddha urged his disciples to abandon the defilements of mind as earnestly as a man whose turban or hair was on fire would attempt to extinguish those flames. There's no complacency, thinking, "Ah, maybe I'll get around to it later. I've got other things to do." No, when your hair is on fire, you don't think about the long list of other possible distractions. You take care of it. It's the business at hand. It's what calls your attention.

If we're complacent, we might allow the fires of greed, hate, and delusion to smolder within our own minds. We might not bother to address them until they burst into flame, causing panic and suffering, until we act on them. And then, in a way, it's too late. It's caused a bit of harm.

So we need the effort to align our energies with our commitments, to maintain a steadiness of attention on our aim, and to do the work that develops wisdom and brings inner peace. Even just to sit every day in meditation. Even just to watch the mind and bring it back to the present moment as we're showering, brushing our teeth, as we're interacting, as we're driving, as we're doing all the various things that we do in a day. To watch the mind in those encounters and to see: is greed, hate, or delusion determining our engagement with activity? If so, can we find an option out? Can we shift to non-greed, non-hate, non-delusion?

Whether we're sitting in meditation or bringing mindfulness to daily life, each moment requires some degree of diligence, of non-complacency. Having a sense of an aim can bring inspiration and a sense of urgency to our practice.

But even if we have a sense of urgency, very often it might appear as though our practice doesn't develop very quickly. Suzuki Roshi said in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*: "After you have practiced for a while, you realize that it is not possible to make rapid, extraordinary progress. The progress you make is always little by little."

Not like going out in a downpour when you know you're getting wet, but rather like walking in fog when you do not know that you're getting wet. If your mind has ideas of progress, you will be disappointed by the pace. So we need patience. We need trust in the gradual unfolding of the path.

I like the term commitment, but sometimes it might sound forceful or too strong, perhaps even restrictive to some people. What is the emotional tone behind our commitments? I think that emotional quality, that feeling quality, the sense of the way we make a commitment varies at different times in our lives.

For me, sometimes my commitment to the spiritual life has felt like just a deep but kind of nagging curiosity—a sense of chewing on something, wanting to know something, not being satisfied with the current state of knowledge and understanding, a sense of having my interest piqued.

And sometimes my sense of commitment has felt so urgent that it was as though I would have sacrificed anything to pursue my practice, that nothing could stand in my way, that my very life depended upon it. It's probably not surprising that during that period of incredible, almost agitated urgency, I flew off to India on a one-way ticket and spent the better part of a decade abroad. I left school, I left family, I left work, I left all my worldly aims behind. I even left my name behind and accepted a new one. I endured typhoid, dengue fever, giardia, hunger, and quite uncomfortable situations. But I didn't want to let anything stand in my way, and it didn't feel difficult because of the energy of that sense of urgency.

At other times, that sense of urgency didn't feel so agitating. In fact, it felt more like a loving devotion—a sense of being deeply devoted to the possibility of awakening, a kind of smooth, deep, but earnest commitment. I simply had the sense of loving the possibility of awakening more than I loved doing anything else. To love liberation and that potential with my whole heart, and to feel a deep caring and

appreciation for the Dhamma path.

And sometimes this sense of commitment feels to me like just a deep calm—a gradual dedication, a gradual inclination, a very gradual training. I often say that the meditator's mascot is the tortoise, the tortoise that just plods along and keeps on going. Sometimes it retreats into its shell—goes on retreat, enters into silence for a few moments, sits in meditation—and then it stretches out into the world again, enduring whatever comes on its path, never giving up, continuing to plod along.

Whatever that energetic flavor is, whatever the emotional style might be, we still need perseverance. We need patience. We need commitment. We need dedication. Because our development takes time. This isn't about snapping our fingers and having instant enlightenment. We're cultivating profound qualities that lead to a potential transformation—a radical transformation, a deep transformation. But usually we must nurture conditions for a long time before those conditions ripen and we can taste the fruit of our practice.

So as you consider what you are committed to, please be careful that you're not committing to some kind of institutional form as your ultimate goal. I think it would be a mistake to place our commitments in social structures, thinking, "I have to attend long retreats to develop my practice," or "I have to ordain as a monk or nun in order to pursue this path." I don't think we need to make a commitment to a particular technique for the duration of our practice or our lives. And we don't need to identify with or become committed to particular teachers or communities. Yes, there's value in loyalty, in trust, in gratitude—those are virtues. And there's value in discipline and steadiness. If we shop around and are always changing our practices, going from this teacher to that teacher every two seconds, we're never going to gain real depth. But our deepest commitments, I think, need to be to something profound—the heartwood of the path.

Commitment is a movement of energy and intention, and it does not require any special costume, any special custom, or any special association, because it is broader than any particular method. At different times in our lives we might emphasize one meditation technique, and then at another time we might emphasize another. This doesn't make the second one better or more important than the first. There are times when we might work with mindfulness of feelings, other times when we might focus on mindfulness of breath. There are times when we might deepen our samādhi and strengthen our concentration, and other times when we might focus on enriching compassion and loving-kindness. Sometimes we'll focus on virtues—really work with the ethical precepts or cultivate our capacity to give, to let go. There are so many different dimensions of the Dhamma path, and at different times in the course of our practice, we may be involved to a greater or lesser extent with different modes of practice.

So perhaps what we dedicate ourselves to is something rather profound—perhaps something we can't even define or limit to a specific image or understanding. What is freedom, really? What is peace? What is the end of ignorance, craving, and hatred? We might have an inkling of it. We might have a sense of it.

But each of these ideas is worth spending a lifetime getting to know. What is the deepest meaning of freedom? Of peace? Can we have a goal that is worth exploring for a whole lifetime, so that the meaning of

it becomes rich and profound?

The commitments that we make are powerful. They set a direction. They have an effect.

And so please reflect: What are you committed to? What are you committed to in your spiritual life?

I'd like to invite you to meditate for a few minutes and contemplate that question. What are we committed to?

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