Adhiṭṭhāna: Determination

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20:04

We're looking at this virtue, this parami, this perfection—the word *adhiṭṭhāna*, resolution or determination.

We have many words for this quality: persistence, tenacity, perseverance, doggedness, resolve, resolution, steadfastness, willpower, purpose, purposefulness, grit. All these are life's little nuances to our understanding of determination.

The word itself can be split into *adhi* and *ṭhāna*. *Adhi* means higher, above, superior—you get it in words like *adhicitta*, superior mind, or *adhipati*, a ruler. *Ṭhāna* is used both in a realistic sense, meaning a place or location, but metaphorically it indicates a state, a condition, a reason, an occasion. Most of you will know the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, where the *ṭhāna* at the end means establishment, foundation. The *paṭi* reinforces that—a deep and profound establishment of *sati*, of awareness. That discourse teaches how to establish awareness.

I like the word perseverance for some reason—just dogged perseverance.

In the Visuddhimagga, it talks about the resolution to undertake and carry out the requisites of awakening without wavering. It's an unwavering commitment, an unshakable resolve. The text also describes an unshakable resolve directed towards a wholesome goal, grounded in wisdom and supported by the other perfections.

What we'll do is go through these perfections and show how *adhiṭṭhāna* acts as a binding force that brings them all together in order for us to attain a particular goal. Here we're centred on liberation, but these principles also work for making a relationship succeed, for tasks at work, for anything you undertake that requires effort—continued effort. All these factors come into play.

Let's go through the paramis. With generosity, *dāna*, you see that when you set yourself a goal, it's being generous to yourself. You're giving yourself something. You're giving yourself an aim. And because we are always interconnected, involving other people, it's also a gift for them. So generosity comes in there somewhere—the feeling of giving.

When it comes to virtue, *sīla*, ethical conduct, you can see how things can go wrong if this element is missing. Someone who has clear determination, I would say, is Putin. He's prepared to put thousands of young men at the front to be killed and wounded. It doesn't actually affect him—he's probably enjoying caviar. But he has that determination to sacrifice everybody to his final aim of expanding the Russian Federation. You see this in all these authoritarians, these tyrants. We could point to other people too, but

we shan't go into that. So in terms of our practice of becoming fully liberated, determination obviously needs to be virtuous.

Now, *nekkhamma*, renunciation. Consider that we've just had a little baby in the family. Many of you will have had children. When you think about having a child, that's a huge commitment, and you have to have perseverance. I think it was Kabat-Zinn—some of you will know all that work on mindfulness training—who said bringing up children was like eighteen years on retreat. That complete devotion. A baby requires twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week attention. And you have to give up something. You have to give up what you would normally have done—go to the pictures, however you amuse yourselves. So determination involves some level of renunciation.

Paññā, wisdom. There has to be a certain devotion to righteousness. I'm thinking here of people who spend an enormous amount of energy trying to get injustices corrected. The example that comes to mind recently, for those in the UK, was this huge miscarriage of justice involving the Post Office, where the powers that be trusted an accounting software. It eventually ended with nine hundred postmasters being dismissed. There were suicides. Some went to jail. A completely miscarried justice.

And it was the actions of one man in particular, Alan Bates, who spent twenty years getting justice. Can you imagine that? Twenty years of perseverance. And that's the sort of wisdom—that idea for justice.

Now obviously, that's going to take energy and effort. But don't confuse effort with perseverance. Perseverance is a mental attitude, whereas effort is the energy you need, both physical and mental. Not having any of these can undermine the whole project.

And then of course there's patience. Like this man—twenty years, for heaven's sake—to actually have the patience and the willingness to endure. That's important too.

And then we have satya, which is truthfulness. It's really being honest about oneself, about one's capabilities. Obviously, if you have an aim that's beyond your capability, you just get burnout and disappointment. I mean, if I started thinking about becoming a professional footballer, got the kit, went training, turned up at clubs—it might be that a good friend would come and tell me that perhaps I was being a bit misguided, not showing enough humility. So there has to be that sense of being real about oneself.

There's method, of course—doing anything that is wholesome. And here we're talking specifically about liberation. It's obviously an act of loving-kindness, an act of care towards ourselves. And because it always involves other people, it's therefore an act of care towards others.

And then finally, there's this quality of upekkha, which is equanimity—being able to bear with things, not getting caught up in disappointment, not going berserk when something wonderful has happened, keeping that even keel. This of course reserves energy and helps us to be more focused when we want something.

So you can see how once you've brought a certain sense of persistence, a certain commitment to something, all your virtues come to support you. Gratitude—once you think about the things that have been given to us, the natural response is to want to give back. Virtues always support each other in some way. Whereas vices—anger, greed—they cancel each other out. You can't be angry and greedy at the same time, even though it might feel like that. They're two mental states that cancel each other out.

So how much determination should we bring to this process of liberation? This is taken from a particular discourse where the Buddha describes the ascetic practices he undertook. He starts off with this clear determination: "Let only my skin, sinews and bones remain, and let my flesh and blood dry up. I will not give up my effort so long as I have not attained what can be attained by human strength."

This took him into those ascetic practices—holding his breath for as long as he could, not eating, almost starving himself to death. And at some point he realized that this was over-efforting, the wrong sort of perseverance. With that realization, he leaves his companions, and then he remembers an occasion in his life—which according to the academics is the only bit of biography you can actually believe—where he recalls watching his father doing an opening plowing ceremony. He's a young child, and you know how young children get involved. He's totally absorbed in what his father is doing, drawn by curiosity, by interest.

This memory not only changes his practice from trying to attain something—trying to attain liberation—to investigating his condition. He realizes that when he was in that state, he was actually very happy.

Now, these experiences have come to be called sutta jhanas—and when I say "now," it's been only fairly recent, perhaps five, seven, ten years, that the whole understanding of sutta jhanas has come to the fore. The older jhana interpretation, normally called the Visuddhimagga jhana, involves becoming completely absorbed and losing all touch with one's surroundings. Those states are beautiful, very enjoyable, but there's no insight in them. Whereas with these sutta jhanas, they're much lighter. You can still be aware of things, but there's that quality of curiosity, and so they become a path to liberation. This is what the Buddha begins to practice, and this is what he refers to when he talks about people doing jhana practice. It's a supportive element to your inquiry.

So it was a case of him realizing this when all the other practices the ascetics were following had failed him.

There's a distinction to be made between this kind of determination and mere willpower. Willpower in the sense of total commitment, but with a narrow vision—you're not aware of the mountains and chasms in your way. You keep collapsing and pushing and pushing. And of course, it upsets everybody around you. That's the willpower approach.

So you know from the reaction of people around you that you might be doing something which is ego-based, pride-based, rather than coming from a sense of humility and of reality—being real about

oneself and real about the situation. That often happens when we're practicing and we move into over-efforting. That's the point where the determination, the perseverance has actually gone a bit wonky. Normally in meditation, if you're sitting and you do that, the meditation just collapses. You just can't do it for a while.

So when adhiṭṭhāna, this perseverance, this resolution is achieved, is developed, there's always that clear understanding about what the goal is. There's a moral integrity about it. There's a consistency about your practice and about what you're devoted to. And there's the ability to endure.

The Buddha reinforces this. When a bhikkhu—that means anybody who's listening—has resolution, has developed it and has made it his basis, the ground of his practice, then he attains the destruction of the taints. These taints, the āsavā, are deep-seated mental defilements. There are four of them. There's craving, the craving for existence—wanting to live, which is understandable, but it's that attachment to life. There's ignorance, ignorance about one's true identity. That's the basic problem. And sometimes wrong view is attached to those āsavā, those taints. They're also called cankers, which is a bit odd. A canker is some sort of white thing on your tongue that hurts. Somebody's called them fermentations. Translators do have a good time, I think.

So finally, how do we actually develop this? It's the small resolutions that you make and keep that builds up the muscle of perseverance. All of us have experienced perhaps being on retreat or on a Zoom or something, and you've made a resolution that you're going to sit every morning for half an hour, forty minutes, one hour, whatever it is. And it works for two or three days. Then it all shrinks, becomes twenty-five minutes, then twenty minutes, and then it just all disappears, and you wonder what's happening. This is a lack of that resolution, a lack of that perseverance.

So one re-establishes it. To establish a habit, you've got to put some energy into it, some commitment. You must do it religiously for three months, and then it becomes ingrained. Not to say that we don't get lazy again and lose it and have to start all over again, but that's the purpose of resolutions throughout the day.

Sometimes—and I've made this mistake myself—you make a resolution to help somebody without real reflection. I remember once a friend of mine said he was moving into a new flat and was going to decorate on the weekend. I just blurted out, "Oh, I'll come and help you." Well, come Saturday morning, the last thing I wanted to do was decorate his apartment. But I was good. I was very good. I determined to go and I went and helped him out for the morning anyway. So sometimes we have to be careful what we resolve. It's a bit like being careful what you wish for.

And we should praise ourselves when we've actually completed something which has taken a little bit of endurance. Often I don't think we congratulate ourselves. We don't have that self-love, that self-praise. There's nothing wrong with that, as long as it doesn't get into ego and "how wonderful I am." But when we complete a task, we should stop and just say, "Oh, that was good. I did good."

In that vein, it's good to remember past times when we persevered with something and achieved something. That builds up confidence. We can do, you see.

To end this off, there are always these little phrases that arahants seem to say when they become fully liberated. One of them is a lovely little thing. It just says, "What had to be done has been done." And you can imagine the relief, being able to say that. We set ourselves a task. We commit ourselves to it. We resolve to complete the task—though you always have to have a little small print.

Save in emergency or extraordinary circumstance, you complete it. And then you can say to yourself: what had to be done has been done. You get that sense of deep satisfaction.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and that by your unshakable resolve, you will attain full liberation from suffering sooner rather than later.

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