Determination: Support for Wise Seeing

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:26

Tonight, what I want to talk about is a particular quality of mind, one of the wholesome qualities, that in the last few years I've been exploring more in my own life, in my own practice, that has just been really useful to me. Would that I'd explored it more in the earlier years. So I just wanted to try and share a little bit about that in hopes that maybe it will be helpful to you. Nothing you haven't heard about before—the quality of determination or resolve.

This is one of the ten paramis, one of the ten perfections of mind, wholesome qualities that it's said one perfects in one's heart and mind in order to become a Buddha. Often the ten paramis are spoken of as ways to practice, things to pay attention to in cultivating the path in our daily life, but in our life here on retreat as well—not any different.

I'll just read out the ten wholesome qualities to you in the order they're usually given: generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, equanimity. Those all sound familiar, right? And you can see how all of these are wholesome qualities. All of them are naturally being cultivated through our mindfulness practice here, and also just through taking the Eightfold Path, trying to practice a life of awareness, of waking up.

Determination is defined very simply as resolution or steadiness of purpose. Several different teachers have said this—Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Sitagu Sayadaw, who is a real big shot Sayadaw in Burma, and some others—that even though determination, adhitana in the Pali, is listed eighth in that list, it can be regarded as the foundation for all of the perfections, the foundation for cultivating all of the ten perfections, because without a firm determination, one cannot fulfill the other paramis. Without a sense of determination, of resoluteness, we don't really do anything. So it's really, in some ways, the basis for all of them.

Personally, I've never heard it talked about in a way that had been helpful to me. Another definition describes it as unwavering—this is the energy of resolution, of determination. That's how I want to talk about it: in the big picture, but also, as with everything, seeing it as a mental factor that arises in our experience now. What we can really do is learn how to recognize it, learn how it supports our wholesome practice, and how we can, in noticing the wholesome, feed the wholesome, learn to trust in and call on determination more.

One description of how it feels is unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement. See how that could be helpful if we want to keep practicing.

Determination is described in vast proportions over time, over eons—sort of like with intention. Remember in the beginning of the retreat when James talked about cultivating our aspiration, our wise intention? It can have the sense of the vast aspiration to wake up, for example. And then it has the moment-to-moment quality of intention in the moment. Determination or resolve is often spoken of in the same way. So we're recognizing how it functions here and now, how we can use it for strength, for energy, for courage—again, to be with disappointment, to keep going.

Most of us—me anyway—seem to know how to do things, how to bring up energy, how to keep on practicing by striving. We make up something we want to happen, and then we push, push, push to make it happen. And this whole retreat, we've been trying to say: relax, observe, allow. And we all say, "Yeah, good idea, good idea." But then what do we do? Just fluff around? If we're not striving, if we're not pushing, how does anything get done?

When James was talking the other night about the different ways to work with thought, work with difficult thought—five different ways of doing it—the question comes up, especially with the last one, pressing down. When do you say, "Okay, here's this difficult thought, and I'll just say no, not now. Just ignore it." Just a simple example of skillful means. When is that skillful? How often do we not know how to bring up the energy for that skillful means if it's not with striving to make something happen? It's with aversion. "No, not now. Not going to be with that thought. Bad thought. Let's do some metta." And even though it looks like we're doing skillful means, the tool, the mental quality that we're calling on is unwholesome, is kilesa. And that's what we're practicing: "I won't have this bad thought."

I will be metta, metta, metta. Yes. I wonder why it's not working. And it feels strong. Just like in our life, anger can be such a strong energy. That's where our refuge can be.

So in practice, in learning to trust mindfulness and not to strive, but still with great steadfastness, be present for whatever's arising. And sometimes I would be left wondering, well, how do I do that? Without willpower, without gritting my teeth, without really forcing, without striving, without aversion. And as I said, it's kind of like we just relax, observe, fluff around, and hope everything will turn out for the best. Is that how we're practicing? It doesn't really work, does it? Because when it's like that—well, la la, I guess I'll just go take a nap, a good long nap, and maybe I'll feel better when I get up. Get up, not better. Well, okay, you know where it goes from there.

So starting to understand resolution as a quality, a wholesome quality, a natural quality that arises in our mind often. But we often don't recognize it. I'm naming it so we can recognize it, turn to it, use it. It's a quality that really brings strength, like it aligns the energy. It cuts through all the dithering. Should I do this? Should I do that?

I'll give you a very simple example of how I've been noticing it. I was sitting on retreat in Burma last year, and when you're in the monasteries there, it's a long day. You get up at three in the morning, and you go to bed whenever. But by three in the morning, okay, you haven't eaten since eleven in the morning the

day before, because your last meal is at ten-thirty in the morning. So you're tired, you're hungry, and you're in a room. No one knows if you get up at three. They don't come around and check. So it's really—you're lying in bed. One is lying in bed when the alarm goes. Should I get up? Who'll know? I'm really tired. Maybe you can relate. Well, it's only four o'clock. The bell didn't go yet. I just need a little extra sleep. Should I? No. Maybe it'd be good to get up. You can think this. You can think that. You can try to decide—is it good? Is it bad? Will I be tired? What should I do?

None of that's resolution. And none of that is really helping you see anything clearly. It's just dithering. What decision do you make from that space? And you can kind of feel that wafted-around energy, not very steady, la la la.

And resolution in the mind—I mean, I've really been playing with this—you can actually recognize it. It's just a quality, very calm and peaceful. It's not a harsh quality. And the energy just aligns. You look at it, almost like you're looking at a resolution. Just get up.

You just get up. You just do it. And all that dithering simply stops. That dithering is a complete scattering of energy. But when resolution comes, instead of "Oh, should I? No, the resistance..." you align with resolution. You just get up. You don't think about whether it's good or bad, this or that. You get up, you pay attention, and wisdom comes. If it was too early, you know the next time. Very simple.

It is very simple when we learn to recognize and trust this quality of mind that's really an aligning of the energy.

That's the little picture. In terms of the big picture, we're talking eons and eons and ages—a really big picture of how determination is presented in the Buddhist background. This is the story of the ascetic Sumedha, and how our Buddha, the one we know historically as Siddhartha Gautama, came to be according to the Jataka tales. Do you remember? Spring told the Jataka tales, that whole series of stories about the so-called previous lives as animals and as people of the historical Buddha. And that whole history begins four incalculables and one hundred thousand eons before our present age. Big picture.

There was another Buddha named Dīpankara Buddha. At that time, there was also an ascetic, a practicing ascetic—not a monk—named Sumedha. He was practicing very sincerely, and when he heard that there was a Buddha, a self-awakened one nearby, he traveled and found the Dīpankara Buddha. He wanted to learn from him.

Sumedha was so touched just on seeing the Dīpankara Buddha, on hearing him, seeing his tranquility, his wisdom, and also how much he was touching people, how much good he was doing for them. Sumedha himself was already committed to waking up, to becoming an arahant. But he received this deep inspiration on seeing Dīpankara Buddha—that as useful or wonderful as it would be to become truly free for himself, to become a Buddha, a self-enlightened one who could be of such great service to so many beings, would be incalculably better to offer.

So on seeing this, he made a vow, a resolution, to do whatever it takes to develop his heart and mind to become a Buddha in a future life. This is really a huge resolution, a deep commitment. In that moment, it's a deep resolve—and then not just through a few sittings and a few years, but through eons and eons and lifetimes upon lifetimes, keeping coming back to this resolve.

What he saw the resolve meant was this: he went to a cave to reflect on what he needed to do to make this vast journey to become a Buddha, because it requires an even deeper purification and cultivation of wisdom than becoming an arahant. On reflection, he saw that it was to develop ten qualities called the ten perfections. These are perfections in the heart and mind, and when they're brought to completion—all ten brought to perfection—those are the qualities that can give rise to a Buddha.

So that's the story. You get a sense of the depth of resolve, and how that in the big picture can feed the willingness to connect with resolve, to connect with commitment in the smaller picture.

Through all his lifetimes, it's said, and those are all the Jataka stories—take it or leave it—but they're interesting as illustrations of cultivating the different perfections. Even in the lifetime we have the story of, there's that larger overarching resolve to become a Buddha that was supporting the foundation for the choices the man Siddhartha Gautama made in his life.

And then there's the way one can make a smaller resolve, a smaller resolution—for example, to come on a retreat and really be as

committed as possible. It's a more time-bound kind of resolve. Or an even smaller resolve—you could sit down in a sitting and say, "I really resolve to be as present as possible in this sitting." Not that you can control how present you are, but you can make that resolve. This sitting, I'm really going to be here as much as I can.

For example, when you're sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, the way that one has to report in interviews is very specific. It's a practice where you're noting every moment what's arising. You start with feeling the breath at the abdomen and then you notice what happens. When you go to an interview, you're meant to describe quite specifically—not your interpretation, not what you think about it, not how you like it, not how good you think your concentration is, not your dreams. Not your thoughts, just what arose in the sitting and how it was noticed. What was the process? Very, very specific. Same in the walking.

So after a while, we would have little notebooks, because who can remember? Just to remember five or ten minutes of a sitting—try it. "The rising breath, and then I became aware of thinking. As I noted thinking, it continued. As I noted thinking again, it faded away. Then sensation arose. As I became aware of the sensation, aversion arose. As I became aware of aversion, I got lost in thought. I was lost in thought for a while. When mindfulness came back, I noted thinking, and it went away. Then I became aware of the rising. In the rising, I felt pressure, tingling, burning." That's how you practice in that form—sitting, walking, and in between. It's far out when you do it. It's far out.

But to go to report, you don't go into Sayadaw U Pandita and say, "Well, I took a breath and then I don't really remember what happened." You don't want to go into him with that. So you have a report.

I noticed—and I know I'm not the only one—that the sittings where I would sit down and say, "Okay, this sitting I'm going to report on," there was a little more clarity of attention. You could see it, not tight, but just: I've got to be here. That little more resolve, a little more determination, a little more commitment. It's a kind of steadiness. My energy is more aligned.

And then sometimes I'd notice halfway through, "Oh, this sitting stinks. Forget it. I'm not reporting on this one." And the quality of attention would really change. You really see what's possible with determination. When the determination goes—ah, who cares—it's gone. That's very interesting to see.

What's possible with determination is much more than we might expect. When there's that resolve, that commitment—and here I'd say, if I had to name an overarching resolve, it's simply to cultivate awareness, to cultivate this quality of mindfulness just for this moment. To show up, to be here with mindfulness, with awareness for whatever's arising now. That resolve, moment after moment after moment.

And so much more becomes possible than you would have thought you were capable of before you started practice. If this is your first long retreat, did you think you'd make it this far? Did you think you could sit through and be with some of the stuff that's come up? And is some of the stuff that's come up what you thought you were here for? No. But so much more is possible when the energy is aligned through resolve, through determination.

Again, just a moment, another little example from my practice, but just a momentary one. Another retreat I was doing some years ago, it was in Burma again. And for some reason, it was just one of those retreats where really extremely difficult, painful emotional patterns or states were coming up at the time.

I remember there was one particular state that would come. I was walking back and forth on my little porch, and the conditions are always a bit more difficult there, which wasn't really the problem. But it's like you're not just all comfy and cozy—"Oh, I don't like it, let me just go have a candy and make some tea and get under my blankie." I don't think so. So there's really nowhere to go and nothing to do.

I'm walking back, and this state would come, which I recognize now is overwhelm. It would come and just become so strong. "Ah, this is unbearable. So much suffering. I just can't deal with this another moment. It's unbearable." But like a hundred times more than I just said it. And it would keep coming over and over. But there was nowhere to go and nothing to do. And I would get the image: "I'll just go lie down on the bed." Like, what would that do? Maybe I tried it once. It didn't make any difference.

So the state would come. And the resolve, the determination, isn't to get rid of the state. It's just, okay, you can just be here. I remember Ajahn Sumedho saying, "I would think this is unbearable. I cannot bear this another moment. And then I see that I could." That's the resolve. "Oh, this is unbearable. This is—oh, mental state." That resolve to just be present for it, and then the wisdom would come in. "Oh, it's a mental

state." And through the wisdom that resolve strengthens—wisdom strengthens resolve; they go together—then, "Oh, I can be with this mental state." It wasn't like, "La, la, la, it feels so nice." A horrible mental state. But mental state. And that's just what it is.

All the energy aligns in that moment of determination, in that moment of resolve, just to be here for it. It's not a harshness. It's not an aversion. And it's not expectation or leaning into it. It's just aligning to be here. And that can change everything.

So resolve comes together with wisdom. It strengthens faith, and faith strengthens resolve, and it brings energy. They kind of circle around each other: faith, energy, resolve, and wisdom.

As a mental factor—now I'm not talking as a pāramī, but as one of the fifty-two mental factors in the Abhidhamma—resolve is said to be ethically variable. So it's this quality of determination, but whether it's wholesome or unwholesome depends on what other qualities are in the mind. I mean, that's clear. You could have a huge determination to do something really harmful or unethical, and really follow it through.

But in terms of a pāramī, in terms of wholesomeness, it comes together with four qualities. This is in one of the suttas, and then Thanissaro Bhikkhu puts it in a little easier language.

But resolve comes together with four qualities, the four qualities of wise determination, the Buddha says. It comes together with wisdom, with wise discernment, with seeing clearly. It's supported by truth, by a commitment to truth, to honesty with oneself. It comes together with relinquishment. And it's also supported by, comes together with, and leads to calm, to peace.

That might sound highfalutin, but I'll give you a really simple example. Not that you have to remember all these four, but in terms of when you wonder for yourself—for example, if you say, "I'm going to do this to make my practice better," and you can't really tell, is this a clear resolve or is it just some wanting, trying to make things better? You can check in with these qualities as you're doing it and see if they are present.

A simple example: say you decide, "I feel like maybe going through the day I'm really quite comfortable. My mindfulness seems good enough." But it's almost so comfortable that you wonder if you could just be a little more present. You can see how that could be either from wanting, from some expectation, or it could really be from seeing clearly—"Yeah, I'm kind of cruising a little bit. Let me look and see."

So one very simple resolve—I've often made this myself on retreat—is: "Okay, from breakfast time until lunch, I'm just going to be very steady. I'm just going to sit, walk, sit, not do any extra activities. Make it a special time to just cultivate moment-by-moment mindfulness." That's a resolve, a kind of small, in-the-moment resolve.

How to tell if it's really wise discernment? It will come together with these four things. First, it comes out of wisdom, wise discernment—the sense that this could be a wholesome thing, strengthening mindfulness.

And also a sense of: is it realistic? If you said, "From the moment I get up, I am not going to have one moment of getting lost in thought until the end of the night"—that's not really very realistic. Maybe it is for somebody here? Anyone here for whom that's totally realistic? You could really do that? Not so much. But one could maybe say, "I can really just focus from eight to twelve. Not that I won't get lost in thought, but I'm making this my mindfulness time." So it has some wise discernment in it, both in the purpose and in what's actually possible.

In terms of truth, honesty with oneself—again, this is an essential quality in all of our practice. In fact, it's said that in all the pāramīs that the Bodhisatta was developing in all those lifetimes, the one he never really broke was truthfulness. Because truthfulness with what we're recognizing, not what we don't see—we can't help that. But when we recognize it, it's just what's here. Not with judging, but simply: "It's like this."

So truthfulness in our willingness to abide by our resolve. When we're in it and we say, "Yeah, it's not working. It's enough. This is good enough. I'm sort of being mindful, but never mind. I know I said I wouldn't do extra, but I'm going to go have a cracker and a cup of tea, and I'm being mindful enough." If you're truthful, you can see that waffling, that wavering coming in—in this particular example, when it was a wise thing to do. So truthfulness means really seeing what we're doing and why.

And relinquishment—that's kind of obvious. The resolve, the determination to collect one's energy in a certain way, means you're relinquishing or giving up certain other possibilities at that time. Maybe for that eight-to-twelve time, you're relinquishing your ten-fifteen cup of tea for that day. That might be a big relinquishment or a little one, but there's something we're relinquishing. In the Sumedha story, in all of those lifetimes cultivating all the qualities to be a Buddha, he was relinquishing a lot. You've all relinquished, I would imagine, a huge amount to be here for five weeks. It's not a relinquishment of negativity; it's relinquishment in service of a deepening and strengthening of resolve.

And the last part: peace or calm. I think this is really important. It's one of the great ways I can tell, because the resolve can be really strong. So this simple thing of just not doing extra activities between eight and twelve for a day—I make the resolve to myself: just for today, whatever comes up, for this time I'm going to be with it. And maybe something really difficult or unpleasant comes up in my mind, and I think, "Oh, but there are all these other skillful means, and I could do this, and I could do that." No. I'm just going to be with it for now. And that isn't like, "You've got to do it!" with tension and striving. It's just: "No, I'm simply going to be with it." It's calm.

It's calming. It doesn't lead to more fluttering and worry and doubt and this and that, which all the thinking and analyzing and comparing does. No, just for now, I'm going to be with it. If it's like this, okay. If it feels like my practice just goes to hell in a handbasket while I'm doing this, okay. It's just what I'm doing.

And then ultimately—and this is what we see with all skillful means—it's not that from doing that, from

then on, total peace. I'm not talking about that. But you can see that if it was a wise resolve and it's supporting our awareness, there'll be some sense of calm or peace with it and after it. Not the sense of sitting through a sitting and no matter what happens, you're going to sit there and you're gritting your teeth.

Have you had sittings like that where it feels like resolve? "I'm not going to move no matter what." And you're sweating bullets, and your teeth are gritting, and you feel like you're going to bust your jaw. And at the end of the sitting, you just want to die, and you never want to come in the hall again. But by gum, I stayed with it. And we did stay with it.

That's not resolve, though. I mean, it feels like it's a resolve. Okay, maybe it's not wise, discerning resolve. It's willpower. And sometimes in our life that can be useful, but it's not the wholesomeness of resolve.

Several people have described to me over the last days different kinds of sittings like that, where things are really difficult in the mind, in the body. And sometimes you say you're going to stay with it, but it's like I just described—and at the end of it, it's not calm. It didn't really feel wise. You relinquish some things, okay, but somehow it's willpower. It's wanting. It's striving. It's expecting.

And another time, stuff's just as difficult, but the mind just isn't making a big deal. The mind just goes, "I'm just here." Somehow it's not a struggle. The mind's just here. And you go, "Why? How? What did I do?" You didn't do nothing.

But notice the qualities in the mind. Notice the wholesome qualities. And just as we've said, when we cultivate the wholesome—I think James or several people have quoted this famous line from one of the suttas—what we frequently think about and ponder upon, that becomes the inclination of our mind.

So that's really why we talk about recognizing the wholesome. Recognize mindfulness. Recognize samādhi. Recognize calm. Recognize resolution. The more we recognize... You're sitting there and, oh, I don't want to move. I can't. And then the resolution's there. You can tune into it. It aligns the energy. It strengthens. And then it starts to fade and you start thinking, "Oh wait"—there's the resolution again. We can incline towards it. We can call it up. It's a huge support.

I've just been finding it so useful. Whereas before I was trying to think, "Is this good? Am I tired? Do I need a rest? I really can't tell." And trying to figure it all out.

When resolution comes, boom, you just do it. Like that Nike ad—just do it. It's like that. You don't have to analyze. It's just so simple. There's so much energy behind it.

You could take the example again of the Buddha, the Gautama Buddha. We know after all of those lifetimes, in this lifetime that we read about, all the practice and the ascetic practices that he did, and the famous night when he sat down under the Bodhi tree and made that famous resolution: "I'm not getting up. I either die or I awaken." And I always thought, well, somehow he knew the right night to make that

resolution. He didn't make it when he first went forth from homelessness. He didn't make it in all those six years of incredible asceticism.

So there's a sense of this huge resolve, but with discerning wisdom that knows what's wise and what seems possible. Truthfulness, calm, relinquishment. It's not saying you don't have resolve if you make some incredibly impossible resolve and then don't live up to it, and you think, "Well, see, that just proves what I always knew—I can't do it." It really requires wisdom and clear seeing.

Another place we can get confused with determination is to confuse it with expectation. Joseph often says, don't confuse effort with expectation, trying to make something happen. Same with resolve. Same with determination. So with mindfulness, for example, our determination to be present isn't moving into a determination to have a specific result. The determination is, "Okay, I'll be here." And then open to whatever shows up.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu had a good description of this, I thought. He's talking about determination and resolve, and he's talking about it in life. He's saying often in a meditation retreat, sometimes it's not so helpful to have a specific goal because we get so goal-oriented and striving. But we've talked about that the whole time. Once we understand that, and once we understand the wise use of resolve and the difference between resolve and expectation, we can use it here. So don't think you can't.

But he's giving a good example of how we misuse it. He says sometimes people come on a retreat and they set a focus, wanting a particular result so that they can say, "I just spent two weeks at the monastery and I came back with the first jhāna"—like a trophy. And he says you usually end up, if you get something that you call jhāna when you go home, with an unripe mango. You've got a green mango on your tree and someone comes along and says a ripe mango is yellow and it's soft. So you squeeze your mango to make it soft and paint it yellow to make it look ripe. But it's not a ripe mango. It's a ruined mango.

So you get a sense of the difference. Even with determination, it can start to slide into wanting. It's not the same thing. And that's where we bring in *sacca*, truthfulness. This isn't that unifying, that solidity, that uprightness of energy. It's starting to lean in, starting to try and make something happen.

In the smaller picture of our practice here—never mind eons and eons and lifetimes—but in our practice not only on this retreat... I'm assuming, even though some of you I don't know, you wouldn't be here if in some way, some part of your life, you were not committed to waking up, to purifying, to cultivating compassion. It's not just about this retreat and then you're going to walk out and blow it off. Well, maybe you are, I don't know! But even just on the retreat, it takes huge resolve, doesn't it? Over and over, this determination to be here for this. Be here for this. Be here for this.

And I've noticed often on retreats, and I've noticed in the last few days talking to different people—we say that retreat's always kind of going like a sine wave. Everyone's not all in exactly the same way, but it'll be going whatever it is for you. Open, things are expanding, and then it contracts again. Then it's open and

flowing in whatever way, and then you think, "Okay, now..." and it contracts again. And sometimes we start to see: okay, that's just the ebb and flow of life, isn't it?

The waves, the seasons, the universe—although maybe the universe is just expanding and expanding. We don't really know if it's going to contract again.

Often, when we're back in a contraction, and it keeps doing that, just like the breath—it can't just go one way. But anyway, I've been noticing over the last few days, it feels like for some it's going into another kind of dip. The place where I call "hitting the wall," where we've really been sincerely working, being present, cultivating awareness and mindfulness and metta, opening to difficult stuff, whatever. But then it hits a place—and it's different for each of us, and for each of us at different times it's different—where the mind just says, "I can't do this," or "I don't want to do this," or "If this is what freedom's about, no thank you very much." I call it hitting the wall.

Sometimes it's like, "Okay, I see my bad habits, and this is a big one. I really get it. Selfing happens a lot. I'm seeing craving everywhere I look. And the more mindful I get, the more I see it." But it's worse. Not only do I see it, I feel the pain of it. And because I feel the pain of it and I see how unnecessary it is and how much delusion it is, I'm really lost in self-judgment about it—because I ought to be over this by now. And it's ten million times more painful now than it was before. I can't bear it anymore. Have you ever had a moment like that? Longer than a moment.

Sometimes it's like that moment I was talking about in Burma—"Oh my God, it's overwhelming. I just can't be with this." I can't do it over and over and over. And then we believe that mind state. You know, forget it. Or sometimes it's just opening to another level, and it may be a subtle level, of the painfulness of our habits, or of our past conditioning, or just seeing something very subtle, like comparing, but seeing it everywhere. So it's so disgusting, you just can't stand it anymore.

Someone said to me once—I thought I was being really nice in the interview, but she said, as a friend, "You know, it's like you're saying to me so nicely, 'You're completely covered with green slime.'" I was just trying to point out wanting. I wasn't taking it personally—wanting, yeah, it comes. And she's like, "Ugh, green slime. You're totally identified." And then the mind says, "I don't want to be with this. I don't want to look anymore."

Or various ideas come into our mind at a certain time. "If freedom means I don't love my family anymore, forget about it." Or "If freedom means no more appreciation of the beautiful"—and that's something we get into a lot. "It means I can't have pleasant experience anymore. I don't want that. It's just dull, gray, boring—forget it." And then we're off into reactivity.

Or sometimes it's even getting caught in what I talked about the other night—our personality view. "Well, freedom, I really would love it, but it's just not possible for me in this lifetime. I'm too..." fill in the blanks. In fact, tonight when I've been talking about determination, if your mind goes, "Yeah, well, that's fine for

someone, but not someone as weak as me, not someone as tired as me, not someone as..." whatever, fill in the blanks, "I couldn't do it"—notice that.

Notice that at times when we hit the wall, when it's just not what we expected. And this is usually a big one: the expectations we have in the background. Pretty much, it's an extremely rare person who doesn't have some expectation going on. You come to a retreat—I mean, you're lucky if you even know what your upfront expectations are. But often about this time, the ones we didn't know, or that we knew but we pretended we didn't know—which is amazing, isn't it? We saw it in the beginning. "No, no, I don't really think that."

No, no, no, that's not really operating. But now it's like, "Okay, where's the bliss? It's been five weeks. Huh? This isn't what I signed up for. Another dip into wanting and aversion and sense of self? No, no, no. Three weeks, okay. Five weeks—I'm ready for some samadhi." And samadhi does not mean noticing changing objects that are unpleasant. Samadhi means heading for bliss, thank you very much. The sense of self? Okay, I've seen it. *Chalo*—goodbye. We don't need it anymore. What's going on?

Or we have some idea of how open our heart should be, how we shouldn't have these unpleasant or aversive or cruel thoughts. Or some idea of how our body was going to open up and purify. We all have these. Maybe you don't, but look and see—if you're hitting a wall, there's almost always some idea back there. And as embarrassing or puerile or foolish as it might seem, it's really helpful to pull that idea out of the shadows and bring it into the light.

I remember last year when I was sitting on a retreat in Burma. I was doing walking meditation, and it was pretty quiet. Things were really quite fine—no big deal was going on, and I was quite happy. I would just notice a little leaning forward. And then I pulled out the thought in my mind. It was like, "Oh, it should be a little bit better than this." Whatever this was, it should be a little bit better. And then I saw—yes, there's this belief: this is samsara. And I'm still trying to fix samsara. And that's the whole point about samsara: it isn't fixable. It's just going on and on and on.

Actually, for me, it was a very funny moment. I was walking in this place, and I saw that. Just—ah, samsara. Then I went into this feeling of just everywhere wanting and not getting, and you get it, and it goes, and trying to make it better, and it's never enough. And it's just so heavy. I was walking outside in this place I liked, and I just kind of looked up—I really was looking up, thinking I'll get some openness, some sky. And it was still trying to improve samsara. The place I chose to look up, there was a little overhang from the building I was walking next to, which I'd never really noticed. This cement overhang in the tropics—it was so disgusting. It was filled with old cobwebs and mold hanging down and dead bugs and flies. It was the most disgusting thing. I thought, "Oh yeah. Samsara—give it up." It was great. It just broke the whole thing.

Sometimes we hit the wall because it's actually going well. And our sense of comfort, our sense of self, our sense of what we're familiar with starts to be broken apart, starts to come undone. It's almost like—I don't

know if Guy used this phrase, I think at Solis he talked about a nostalgia for samsara. So when you see aspects of your personality—that lonely aspect, that greedy whatever it is—and you see moments when awareness simply sees it and you don't buy into it, and then it's gone, you go, "Oh, but that's me." It's like putting on a nice, warm, cozy coat, and we want it back. Like, "No, who would I be without my whatever?" This pull of nostalgia for some familiar suffering. "Oh, I can't do this."

I don't want to do this. I don't want to be nothing and nobody. It's a very unfamiliar sense of myself.

And so this is where determination, resolve, really supports us—in the form of courage. A courage that's willing to show up for that discomfort, that dis-ease, that sense of unfamiliarity. Realizing that freedom from clinging is completely uncompromising. It's not freedom from most clinging while you get to hold on to a few things. It's freedom from clinging that transforms our views of ourselves, our views of the world, our comfortable and even uncomfortable little standpoints that we have. They all start to get seen through. And even though that's freeing, it can also be quite unsettling.

If we just want to stick in our minds—what we think about it, what should we do—we can really get swept into doubt and confusion, or we hit that wall. Resolve is just: okay, be with this. Unsettling is like this.

Because enlightenment, waking up, it's not a self-improvement project. It's not about fixing our personalities. As Ajahn Sumedho said, it's not our personality that gets liberated. It's seeing through all the standpoints. We can still use our standpoints, our views, but it's seeing through them all.

I love this quote from Stephen Batchelor. He says realizing emptiness is not just an experience of oceanic bliss. It's more a falling apart of all our strategies of self-interest, of self-centeredness, of seeming protection. And although freeing, it can also bring about a great sense of disconcertion, confusion, dis-ease—like being in what he calls a no man's land, where nothing is familiar for a while.

And that place of unfamiliarity, it's uncomfortable often. So this is where we really call on our resolution, our commitment—not to make it be a certain way or get out of the discomfort, but just: okay, show up for this. Dis-ease is like this. That willingness to just open into the unknown. Whatever this next moment is, we don't know. Resolution just unifies our energy and allows us to do that. Moment by moment. Not willpower, not forcing, not expectation, but as Sayadaw U Tejaniya has written all over the place: never give up. Don't push, don't strive, but never give up. Just being here for this.

Maybe I've used this example before, but it's a good one to me of never giving up. Some of you may have seen the movie—it's been out a few years now—called *Touching the Void*, about two men that were mountain climbing together in the Andes in South America. It's a recreation of something that happened maybe twenty years ago. It's very intense, so I'll try to make a long story short.

They're mountain climbing together, just the two of them, and they're roped together way, way up high in snowy mountains. They're descending, and the one ahead somehow skids and falls off a ledge. So he's hanging way down, and they're roped together. For a really long time, the guy who's still up is trying to

pull the other one up. He can't get him up. There's this huge void down there, this huge abyss. For hours they can't get him up, they can't move, they can't do anything.

So finally, the guy who's up there cuts the rope. That was his decision, what he did. And certainly in mountaineering, you never do that. But that's what he did. He cut the rope and went back to their base camp. Waited to see what happened.

So the guy whose rope was cut fell into a big crevasse in the ice. He falls down into it, so it's dark and narrow, and he lands on a kind of shelf. And he'd broken his leg. So he's on this shelf for—I don't remember how long—quite a long time, twelve hours, longer. And he said later, he's terrified of this dark, of this crevasse.

And he's way down there. He can't get up. He's way down. And it keeps on going down further, and he's just on this little shelf. So he's there for twelve hours, twenty-four, I don't know how long. But at some point he said, "I couldn't just abdicate. I had to, all of a sudden, make a decision." And the only thing he could do was lower himself further down into that crevasse, which completely, completely terrified him. And he had no clue if it just went on forever or what would happen. But he said, "I could not abdicate. I had to do something."

That's the quality of resolution—just opening into the unknown. Amazing. Well, I don't know. In some way, maybe it's not so physical. But there are times in practice when it's that level. And we think we can go back to our little cozy nest. But we bring up the resolve, just be here, and it will open by itself.

So anyway, obviously he made it out. He said, "I had to make a choice. I may be wrong." So what happened—he lowered himself. His leg was broken. But he hit ground, and it kind of went up, and he could see daylight. And he managed to crawl out. And it took him three or four days on his broken leg to crawl over this incredible terrain—mountains, sliding down, rocks—to get back to where the base camp was.

And by the time he got back, the other guy had been waiting for days and was just about to leave. He had burned all the other guy's clothes, was about to go. And the guy had just—I mean, it's amazing he was still alive after these four days. He said he was so—nothing to drink, nothing to eat—really delirious. And when he was getting close to the base camp, the only thing that kind of snapped him back out of delirium enough to know he was close was the smell of urine from where they'd been peeing when they were camping there. That smell was so strong, it kind of woke him up and brought him into his mind enough to get back to the base camp.

It's a very intense, very intense story. But can you imagine the temptation? "Well, I'll just hang out on the crevasse. I'll just hang out here on the shelf because it's too scary to do anything else." And sometimes we feel like that in our practice. But really, we can't abdicate. And you don't want to abdicate. Never give up.

There's a great story. Ajahn Sumedho was telling us one time—I think we were meeting with him again, a

bunch of Spirit Rock teachers. And he was talking about, just in his own life of practice, a period. He was the abbot of Amaravati for many years. So he's talking about a period of about ten years ago when there was great difficulty at the monastery, a lot of interpersonal difficulty, a lot of upheaval. And he, being the abbot and also the one who kind of ran things, he was getting a lot of blame. People were really—and these are all people who live together and know each other well. So he was getting a lot of blame, a lot of anger.

And he said, "My personality hated that and feared that. I want to be loved. I want to be liked. And everyone's blaming me, and I'm having to still stand up and take it all and still make the hard decisions. It was horrible for my personality." And he was starting to really feel beaten down.

And then he said he realized, oh, he was buying into his personality. And he said—and he used this word—"I made a determination to trust awareness." I love that.

Like the time when we're really in our stuff. And we can see we're in our stuff, but it's so real. We say, yes, I'm really believing the personality, sakkāya-diṭṭhi, is what is true. And he just made a deep resolve on trusting awareness, which is trusting mindfulness, intuitive awareness. Personality still arising, blame still arising, hating the blame still arising—awareness of it like this. The trust is in the awareness, not in the personality.

That's a huge resolve, one we can make over and over and over again in our practice. Doesn't mean we know how it's going to turn out. Doesn't mean that it's the same path for each of us. And we make the resolve over and over and over again, don't we?

I want to end with a story about this quality of resolve and commitment and how strong it can be in lives. Maybe some of you have seen the movie about when Tsoknyi Rinpoche and some Western women went back to Tibet to visit a group of nuns called the Nangchen nuns. Their story is that they lived in the remote mountains of Tibet—about forty nunneries during the Cultural Revolution of China, after China had taken over Tibet. It was in 1959, but then there was the Cultural Revolution in the seventies. And at that point, many of the monasteries and nunneries were destroyed.

So these nuns, the Nangchen nuns up in the remote mountains of Tibet—all their nunneries were destroyed, and the nuns were scattered. Different things happened to them. Each had to find a different way, but they held their deep commitment, their resolve in themselves of being nuns. That was their path. Some of them had to go back to their nomadic homes and live with their families. Some of the nuns didn't survive this period when the nunneries were destroyed. Some were sent to work camps. Some managed to go deep, deeper into the mountains and live like hermits in caves. But all of them that survived, in their own way, really stayed true to their internal resolve of living as nuns.

What happened was that in recent years they were starting to be allowed to come out of hiding, to come back from their families and begin to rebuild these nunneries—which already was huge. They were

dragging the stones and the wood up these giant, giant mountains by hand to rebuild the nunneries. But they were saying the ones who had been living with their families had to disrobe. So they were like secret nuns. They would do their practices in secret, in their minds, in silence, even keeping it from their families sometimes. They would look like they were living a normal life, but they were doing hidden practice—committed to being nuns inside, over and over and over.

So when they could come back out and come together as nuns again, even though externally... you have to use discerning wisdom. You don't know what conditions are going to be presented. Resolution isn't about it's always going to be like this. It's about our hearts and minds aligned with truth, and whatever we need to do to cultivate that commitment to truth and wakefulness in ourselves.

So when Tsoknyi Rinpoche and these Western women were visiting, they went back again and were starting to see these nuns come out of hiding. Some of them had starved to death. Some had been close to starvation for twenty years while they were in hiding up in the mountains or with their families. And now they were so happy to be able to come back.

The culmination of the whole movie—they took the visitors up to visit this old nun really at the top of this tiny, tiny little cabin up on the top of the mountain. Really old. And they said they thought she was one of their most awakened ones. The movie shows her. She's just lying in a bed. She's got so many wrinkles. She looks like about 120, really. Who knows? And her eyes are just so bright, beaming. She's just lying there. It doesn't look like she can even walk or get up. She's just spinning her little prayer wheel. And they say to her, "So what are you doing?" She says, "Well, all my waking hours, all that's in my mind are wishes for the happiness and freedom from suffering of all beings." She's just lying there, so bright, spinning her prayer wheel every moment she's awake.

So who knows how our resolve is going to show up.

But to end with something from the Buddha, where he says two things: "Two things I never lost sight of—not to shrink from the struggle, and not to stay contented merely with wholesome states of mind."

Don't sell yourself short. Don't be afraid to own your aspiration.

The Buddha: "This holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, nor the attainment of virtue for its benefit, nor the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or even knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its essence and its end, its heartwood."

So don't sell yourself short. Don't abandon your resolve.

Thank you. Let's just sit.

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