Aspiration and Resolution: Saddhā and Adhiṭṭhāna

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 51:45

So I thought tonight I would talk a little bit about aspiration, inspiration, and resolution, or resolve. Or you could say saddhā and adhiṭṭhāna, if we want to go into the Pali.

Saddhā is usually translated as faith, confidence, or trust. Adhiṭṭhāna is one of the pāramīs, one of the ten pāramīs, translated as resolution or determination.

Hopefully, you're beginning to realize—I know this doesn't sound hopeful—but you're beginning to realize, after hearing Monica describe so well the five hindrances, which you all recognized, right? They weren't unfamiliar, and they will continue to be familiar. I hope you're starting to see, even though it's only been a few days, that this path is vast and all-inclusive. It includes all aspects of our life, all aspects of our mind. And it's not just a nice trajectory—nicer, nicer, nicer, nicest. It goes up and down, up and down, and everything's included.

There are plenty of times when what happens or arises is something unexpected, something we didn't think was possible for us, something beautiful. And just as frequently, the next day or the next sitting, it all just goes bonkers. "I had the most peaceful sitting ever, so quiet. And then the next time I sat, it was just thoughts all over the place. What did I do wrong?" As if it were in our control.

All of life, everything is included in the path. And that's reflected in our meditation practice. So much comes up frequently that can be challenging or difficult, and that's going to keep happening in different ways. That's not wrong. That's really where so much of the learning and the freedom arises—learning how freedom arises in the midst of the unpleasant. Freedom isn't about getting rid of the unpleasant. If we could all only really get that one thing, we'd save ourselves so much grief. Freedom's not about getting rid of the unpleasant because you can't. That's life.

My point is that there are plenty of times when what comes up is difficult. Sometimes the mind, the heart is really in balance, and we can meet it with practice. And there are other times when that's just not quite the case. What comes up is either stronger than the mindfulness at the time, or there are times we're just—let's face it—fed up. There are times we're bored. There are times it's stronger and we're overwhelmed.

This calls forth from us again and again a willingness to recommit. Both Dawn and Monica mentioned in different ways, suggested how helpful it can be to consciously tune into your own personal deepest

aspiration. Not what you want your sitting to look like, but the deepest aspiration—what's really important, most important in your life.

This can be really helpful, to consciously connect with it every day, but particularly in times when we're feeling a sense of struggle or a sense of being lost. Sometimes we're struggling and it's just fine, but sometimes it's like, "I just can't face this," or "What the heck am I doing here anyway?" That would happen to me sometimes. It wasn't really struggle. I'd just be walking, and whereas walking before I was loving it, in this particular walking I'd think, "What am I doing? Lifting my foot, putting it down, and feeling it? What's the point of this?" That can come and go, but you follow that too far down the road, and you really stop doing it. You have to reconnect.

I want to talk a bit about what aspiration is. It's different from expectation. Aspiration is an aspect that feeds faith, trust, confidence, willingness to do. Aspiration is really tuning in for yourself to the bigger picture. It's looking at a sense of what's really possible.

What really inspires you? Why are you doing this? And it can be vast. Don't be shy or think, "Well, I can't possibly have an aspiration to awaken because I'm just a stupid jerk. Maybe I can have some nice sittings." Don't. No. Aspiration is really opening to what's true for you though—not what you *should* have as an aspiration. It has to be true for you. But when we tune into it, it's a big picture of what is possible.

It's a wholesome quality of heart and mind. When we tune into aspiration, with greater or lesser degree of course, it uplifts the heart and mind. This is actually a quality of how faith affects us. It's uplifting, it brightens, it energizes the citta, the heart and mind. It strengthens our willingness in that moment, our commitment to just fully be with whatever it is that's arising. You could say it strengthens faith. Sayadaw U Pandita would say that faith gives the willingness to do. It strengthens resolve. And so tuning into aspiration in this way can be so supportive.

And it's a moment of thinking. It's a contemplation. That's fine—using wise contemplation. It's not like you're thinking about it for five and a half hours. It's just a tuning in. You can kind of feel it in yourself.

And yes, it may be conceptual. Say one's aspiration is to awaken and cultivate compassion. One can think, "Okay, that's looking at a result. That's looking at a goal. Doesn't that feed striving and all of that?" But when it's aspiration, when it's wholesome, it's not about wanting. It's just about recognizing: wow, it's really possible. And that's important. Otherwise, what the heck are we doing? That's important.

But for many of us—probably all of us at some time—it can switch to expectation, or maybe we don't quite understand the difference. So expectation could verbally say the same thing: "I'm really here to awaken and cultivate compassion." But the quality of mind, of heart, is very different. It's got like one eye on the result. "I'm here. Am I there yet? I'm here. How much longer? I'm here."

Expectation is definitely coming together with greed, with craving. Whereas aspiration has the quality of uplifting—maybe not all the way to the sky, but a little bit at times—and brightening and strengthening

the heart and mind, when there's greed, when there's that wanting, it feels so different. It narrows the consciousness. The Buddha said once that greed, hatred, and confusion are makers of measurement. I could go into a lot of things about that, but just right now—a measure we can feel when there's that wanting, that expectation. The citta is contracted. It's narrower. There's the wanting, and so consciousness is narrow, and it leads to disappointment and frustration and comparing and doubt and the whole nine yards.

Probably you're not familiar with any of that, but it can happen if there should be, by some chance, expectation arising in your heart and mind. Not that any of this is bad. This is all impersonal. There's cause and effect. But when you start to feel this sense of contraction and dis-ease and disappointment when you think of awakening, it's not awakening's problem.

It's the sense that the quality in the mind has come into wanting. So then just bring awareness to wanting. That's fine. But don't confuse it with aspiration. Also, don't be afraid of aspiration because it might move into wanting. Good chance it will. Good chance everything moves into wanting one time or another, right? If you try to avoid everything that wanting might arise from, just hang it up. It's impossible.

But we don't need to be afraid of wanting. Mindfulness is quite happy to be mindful of wanting. It's no problem. It really is no problem if we're mindful of it.

Getting in touch with and remembering our aspiration—just at times when we think, "What do I do now? How can I keep going?"—just take a moment to connect with your aspiration, that's all. It's not like it's going to fix everything, but it begins to just connect us a bit again to faith, so that we don't get so overwhelmed, so we don't get lost in that.

And frankly, the more I've practiced, the more I appreciate this. I think I do this much more than I used to. I used to think you just have to practice and do it and do it yourself. But there's nothing wrong with inclining to the wholesome. There's nothing wrong with bringing in aspiration, and as I'll say in a minute, inspiration—even from others.

The path is difficult. It is challenging, a lot, because as Monica said last night in that very well-known statement, the Buddhist teachings kind of go against the stream of the majority of culture. It's like swimming upstream. But it's not only against the stream of culture. It's against the stream of our own familiar habits—habits of mind, of personality, of perception, and how we describe and define the world.

One of the reasons that at times the continuity of our mindfulness practice is so challenging is because perceptions will arise that are other than what we're used to, that we haven't really opened to or seen before. We're stepping outside of our familiar worldview. This isn't a thinking thing; it happens by itself. And so that stepping outside of the familiar worldview, or of our comfort zone—sometimes we need some support for that. If we're just relying on, "Okay, well, I'm out of my comfort zone," we don't know where it's going.

So just connecting with aspiration, and in a minute I'll say with some inspiration, can give us the strength not to figure it out, but to simply surrender again into the totality of presence in this moment—without needing to understand it all and know where it's going, or like it, or feel comfortable in it.

I'm a comfort wallah. I like comfort. Give me a choice, I go for comfort. A lot of us do. But seriously, if we stay within our level of comfort, we're not going to learn. Because a lot of comfort is actually just coming from familiarity with—basically wrong view, a lot of the time. We'll be talking about that in many different talks. But being comfortable isn't necessarily your best reference point for how things are going. Being uncomfortable doesn't necessarily mean there's a big problem.

Learning to be with discomfort, with unfamiliarity—that's a lot of the practice. It's a lot of life. And so just being willing to ask, "What can support, brighten the heart and mind, give a little strength, give a little willingness to do, willingness to meet?" I find this really helpful in terms of starting with the aspiration.

But not only aspiration. The next thing I'll talk about is faith. Faith, of course, is the first of the five spiritual faculties—five wholesome qualities of mind that develop as we're meditating and that are very supportive. The first one is faith. It gives rise to vīriya, to wise effort, to energy, to mindfulness, to samādhi—collectedness of mind, steadiness of mind—and to wisdom. Those five all work and support one another.

As I said, Sayadaw U Pandita would say faith is really what launches us. Without some faith, we're not going to have the willingness to do. And by faith here, as I'm talking about it—this is just me—I don't at all mean a belief in something, like believing in the Buddha's teaching in some conceptual way. But it could be a kind of trust.

A sense of confidence, which is different from just believing something. A sense of confidence that gives us the willingness to put the practice into practice.

So faith—one of the ways it's talked about is that the first arising of faith, and we all need some kind of arising of faith or confidence to start on a path, to come here to meditate. You don't just say, "What the heck, I've got nothing else to do." You have to have some kind of faith to get us here. So in the beginning, this first arising of faith is called bright faith.

Bright faith comes, you could say, from outside—something we've read, someone we know who really inspires us. It can be an experience. Sometimes you have an experience, you don't know where it's from, but there's a real sense of "Wow, there's a whole different way of being." A sense of the mind-heart without kilesa, how that feels. You don't even know what it is, it's so unusual, but you want more of that. Bright faith inspires, it brightens, it uplifts the heart and mind. It's a beautiful quality.

So tuning into bright faith, again with the aspiration, but not thinking we have to do it all by ourselves. It can be when we're feeling really flat and dull and we can't find our way—taking a moment to reflect. It may be a person who originally inspired you or someone who's inspiring you now. It doesn't have to be a

big teacher. It could be anything. But something that touches a quality in ourselves. That's how bright faith works. It's not faith in that person exactly, but recognizing their great generosity or their compassion, or somehow being in their presence you feel a sense of calm—whatever it is. It inspires us because it touches that quality in ourselves. Oh, something other is possible.

Bright faith then strengthens into what's called verified faith. And I know we all have verified faith to some extent, because believe me, you wouldn't last four days here without it. Verified faith comes from our own experience. We know something is true. Even though I don't always have the perception of impermanence, I know that everything's in constant change. That's verified faith—confidence in that. It doesn't mean you always recognize it, but you know it. If someone came up and tried to convince me, "No, everything's really solid," it just doesn't work.

But bright faith—we can draw on it. Sometimes when I'm feeling flat, when I can't find the aspiration, when my energy is low and I don't know what to do, I take a moment and reflect. I just want to give you a few examples because it makes me happy to talk about, and I get to do that since I'm the one talking. But I want you to see how much I've learned about the power of faith to give strength to wholesome qualities of mind—resolution, willingness to do, generosity, energy.

I've learned a lot about this from spending time in Burma and meeting many different Burmese nuns in various aspects of life and different circumstances. Because these nuns, compared to the complexity of the Western mind, are perhaps more simple. The ones I'm thinking of are not highly educated in the university sense, but they have a great deal of Buddhist education and understanding. Basically, I'm thinking of two in particular who have tremendous faith—really strong faith, faith in the Buddha. One particular nun, Daw Tha was her name, had huge faith in the Buddha. This is living in Burma, in a Buddhist culture.

So it's much more part of things in that culture.

When she first became a nun, when she was about 20, she had a debilitating illness. The doctors had given up and thought she would die. And so finally her parents let her become a nun. She had so much faith that within six months, somehow that just strengthened her heart and mind and she became healthy.

She and her sister then—they lived in a small village several hours away from the main city, Yangon, a very simple village—came up to Yangon and they were in a meditation center where the Sayadaws were teaching. She was telling us her story at our request. Her goal in life was liberation. That's what she wanted. And they were just really dedicated, these two sisters.

And then, as so often happens with a lot of the nuns while they're still young, in their early 20s, the head Sayadaw from their home village reached out to them. In these small country villages, sometimes the head Sayadaw is kind of like the big chief—the guy who made good. He's really respected and in a way almost runs the village and does a lot of things for the people.

So anyway, he sent up maybe 10 or more young girls who were either orphans or whose parents were very poor and couldn't take care of them. There was no good education in the village. This story could be repeated 10,000 times. This is just one that I know. The Sayadaw just sent these young girls up to these two sisters, Uttara and her sister, and said basically, "These are for you to take care of and educate." Not for a couple of weeks, but until they're grown up.

This happens all the time. A lot of the nunneries are almost like the safety net for young orphan girls, for poor girls, so that they have somewhere to learn a good life. They become nuns when they're sent there.

So the Sayadaw sent these little girls to them, and the sisters accepted without a murmur. They said, "Okay, well now this is our life." Their faith is so strong. Their practice is what's called Buddhānussati, which is reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha.

This is interesting to me—this is how bright faith works, what I've learned about it. I see that in them. That particular practice, it doesn't light me up, you know what I mean? It's nice and all, but that practice of Buddhānussati, just going over and over the qualities of the Buddha, it's just not my way. But being around them and seeing their faith—their faith touches the faith in me. Or in others of us, I know I am not alone. That's really what's inspiring, to see the faith. Being around them really brightens my faith, really gives me a lot more energy and willingness to do, seeing not only their faith, but then how that serves to manifest in their life.

So back to the story. They left the meditation center. They found a little piece of land, which they somehow borrowed the money for and started building a little bamboo shack. That's what they all do—move into it with these 10 little girls or however many. And there would always be a few more every year. Everything's done on donations. They don't have money. They get donations to slowly, slowly build a place to live. The girls all become nuns. They're sending them to school. They're educating them.

Talking to Uttara, she described how it was like a 180-degree turn in her life—completely opening into it with faith and surrender, total commitment. She would tell us she's really committed to these young girls, and you could see it. I mean, we've been seeing her over the years. There's affection there. They're taking care of them. You can tell by hanging out with them that they're really connected, and there's a lot of affection. And she's really clear: now this is our path. Sure, when they're all grown up and gone, we want to go back and meditate more. But for now, this is the path—a total surrender, a total willingness to do, because it's a huge amount of work. And it's what they do. This is from their faith, and it deepens their faith.

She said, "We just want to give these girls a chance to see that they can learn sīla, learn a right way to live. It's not that we expect them to stay nuns their whole life."

When they're eighteen, they can do what they want. This keeps them from a worse possibility, but also allows us to teach them how to be truly moral, beautiful human beings. And you could see she meant that.

So to me, that's one way I've really come to appreciate the power of faith to help us genuinely use whatever life is giving us. *This* is our path. This is our path of awakening. This is a path of cultivating metta and compassion. Not "How can I get out of this? How can I go back to the meditation center?" I'm sure my mind would have tried that out. So yes, that's one story that's really inspiring to me in terms of faith—loving what is, embracing reality as the path, and giving everything to it.

Or here's another, completely different way that bright faith can touch me. And I'm sharing this to invite you to see what's true in your life. It doesn't have to be some great teacher. It might be a friend whose generosity really lights up that quality in you and gives you the willingness to do, the willingness to commit.

There's a monk, a relatively simple monk, quiet, who has a small monastery up in the Sagaing Hills. I have a little picture of him that Greg took, which I often take with me on retreat. He's pretty simple. The monastery's small. But he's just very peaceful, very calm, and he radiates metta—but in a simple way. He's not some big teacher giving lots of Dhamma talks. We go to visit him when we go there every year, and just hanging out, walking into the monastery, there's this sense of calm and peace. It's very tidy. He puts out food for the dogs and the deer out in the woods.

I just love being there, even though we can hardly talk to him—he only speaks Burmese—but there's this radiant kind of peace. We've known him for at least fifteen years. More. Since 1997. He doesn't even look any older. I keep saying he's this young guy, but he can't be. He looks the same. We were shocked when he first came out with a cell phone—"Oh my God, he has a cell phone!" But that was the year all the sayadaws got cell phones.

Anyway, I just think of him, and it brightens up that quality of serenity, of a simplicity of metta, in myself. It gives me the faith, the energy, the willingness—not to try and be like that, but to meet whatever life is throwing at me, whatever practice is coming up right now. Because this is the only way to understanding and awakening: what's happening now. We have nothing else but what's happening now. So that's another way that bright faith is really lit in me.

One last example of seeing how faith can give unexpected people the energy, the willingness to do something that would never have seemed possible.

This is another nun, Sumanachari, at Appamata. She came to us some years ago. She had a nunnery with about twenty-four, twenty-five nuns. She always seemed, to me, kind of depressive. There was the nunnery, and they were there just living like a nunnery. Not a lot of little nuns, mostly grown nuns. She's lovely—she would invite us over for mohinga—and she was nice, but she just seemed a little depressive, not much energy.

And then this one year she came over and was telling us how she was so unhappy in herself, she couldn't sleep at night, because she had realized that what she needed, what she really wanted to do, was to open a

school—a free school for young kids. A lot of kids couldn't... this was before now, I don't even want to talk about how it is now, but this was some years ago, maybe ten years ago. There were government schools that are supposedly free, but there were all kinds of hidden costs. A lot of young kids—their parents couldn't afford to send them. So some nuns and monks would open schools in their monasteries and nunneries and make them free for the kids.

She wanted to do that for young kids up to about grade four. That means not only having a space—and the school just starts by being like a roof with desks, think of that as the school—but also hiring teachers, regular teachers.

All of this has to come from donations. They don't have any money. But the teachers are regular lay teachers that get paid a salary. So she needs to somehow raise the money to build this place, to hire teachers, to make room for it. And honestly, we really couldn't see how she could do it.

But we donated some, and a lot of people donated, I guess, because when we came back the next year, she'd done it. We went over to the place, and it had two buildings that the nuns lived in. One of them was gone, and all the nuns had crowded into this one building so that in the other area, she'd built this huge open space with a roof, filled with desks, hired some teachers, and over a hundred little kids were coming now every day. And that's just been growing over the years.

A huge amount of work. A huge amount of generosity, giving up how they lived. And she came and she was radiant. She was transformed. She said—let me see, I think I wrote it down—she said, yes, she's really tired. It's so much responsibility. You have to raise the money, pay the teachers, get the buildings going, sometimes provide the food. She says, "I'm exhausted, but I'm radiant." She says, "Now I sleep. My citta is peaceful. My heart, my mind is peaceful." And she's just kept going. This was some years ago.

So to me, when I think of it, that's a great example of how faith can lead to the willingness to do, and the sense of resolution—which is what I want to talk about now—the adhiṭṭhāna, the willingness, the resolve to just keep doing. Because once she started that school, you couldn't go, "Well, I don't feel like doing it anymore," right? Even in our meditation, even in our life.

I want to talk about adhiṭṭhāna, the pāramī of determination, resolution, because as a pāramī, it's a mental state. It's a mental factor. It's something we can experience in our hearts, in our minds. We can experience it here. We can learn to recognize this quality and incline our minds to it because it supports doing. It supports commitment.

Sometimes people say to me—a lot of people have said this—"If I give up wanting and aversion, as if we could, but if I didn't have wanting and aversion, how would I do anything? Would I just sit in my room?" I mean, that's heartbreaking, seeing that the only motivations for actions that we know are greed and aversion. So adhiṭṭhāna is a wonderful motivation to help us in intention.

It's a mental factor, and I want to just describe it, the ways it's described in some of the commentaries:

resoluteness with steadiness of purpose, just really steady, unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement. Another example that's given is like steadfast, unmoving, like a stone pillar. Okay, that last one sounds a little inflexible—stone pillar, by God, I'm doing this. It's not like that. But it's really useful to explore and get familiar with. I've been finding it so helpful in practice and in life. So we can learn to recognize it.

As I said, we know how to do difficult things. We all have, not just coming to a retreat—that's difficult enough. Raising a family, going to work, taking care of elderly parents. We've all done things that are difficult, things we have to keep having some commitment to do. And I'm sure some of the time the motivation might be this adhiṭṭhāna, this form of resolve, which I'll describe more.

But a lot of the time—and we see this when we come to just being with the breath—the way we know how to do stuff is by pushing, striving. A lot of times people say, "I don't know how to do stuff other than that."

All this receiving, this doing of non-doing—what the heck are you talking about? We just know how to do things by striving and willpower. And we get stuff done that way. Like the people who say, "What do I do, just sit in my room?" We haven't really learned how to recognize consciously these other qualities, so we tend to use force. We tend to use willpower, aversion, or wanting.

And this can feel strong. Often people say anger, aversion—it feels strong. It helps you meet something difficult. It can help you overcome. And that might be true. But the quality in the heart-mind is not calm. It's not clear-seeing. It's the kilesas. It's a suffering quality—not just because it's unpleasant if you look carefully, but the real suffering of the kilesas is when they're present in the citta, in the heart-mind, without mindfulness recognizing them. They distort perception. We don't recognize accurately.

I think Monica might have said this last night, and the Buddha said it too: whenever any of the kilesas are present in the heart-mind and you don't see them, you can't see clearly. You can't see your own good, you can't see the good of another, you can't see the good of both. And so maybe we're pushing through with wanting, with aversion, we're getting stuff done—but it's coming together with this unwholesome confusion that increases greed and aversion and confusion.

Adhitana, determination as a parami, is wholesome. The inner experience is that you're present with great steadiness, but without aversion, without wanting, without this willpower sense of "me doing it, I'm so great." It's a beautiful quality, really. How do you say? It's like it aligns the energy. There's a sense of collecting the energy. It's calm. And we can learn to recognize it in our minds.

Several people have described how when we're lost in thought, the thought comes and then we see it. And often our habit of coming back to the breath is "get back to the breath!" And you get back to the breath, but there's a lot of aversion. But when you can say, "No, not now"—it's clear seeing. It's not "not now" with a hammer. No, not now. The energy's aligned. It's clear. "No, I'm just not doing that now. Come back to the breath." And you may do that ten million times, but feeling, learning to recognize how that quality of

aligning energy feels, how that steadiness feels—it really calms the mind. We can learn to recognize it and incline the mind towards it, actually call it up.

A simple example—I've used this before in other talks, but in my daily life, every morning for two or three years, I've been liking to do about fifteen minutes of qigong exercises. When I do them, they're actually pleasant, and I almost always feel better. My energy kind of balances from doing them. But not every morning, almost every morning, I just don't feel like doing it. It's like, "Time to do the qigong." No. I don't really feel like doing it. And there's no good reason for it. It's just, "I'll just sit here. If I don't have to be somewhere, I'll have another cup of tea. Then maybe I can do the qigong. Or maybe after breakfast, then I'll do the qigong."

You know how that goes, right? "I've been trying to sit every morning..." I don't know—you English speakers, is this word your first language? "Dithering." It's a good word. Maybe I will, maybe I won't. I'll do it now, no, I'll do it later. Let me just rest a little bit first. But the rest isn't restful, because your mind's going, "Oh, I should..." Every morning, ridiculous, right? It's just—when you just get up and do it, it's so much easier. Even if you dithered, when you finally do it, it's nice, because the dithering's over.

One morning, I just noticed it. I started with that familiar "ah," and I said, no, just do it. And you can feel—I can feel—the energy just aligns. It's just, yeah, get up and do it. You stop with all the rationalization and this and that and the other. You just forget all of it. You just get up and do it.

Sometimes Sayadaw U Tejaniya would hold up the Nike swoosh—their slogan is "Just do it." He would just hold it up. But that's what adhiṭṭhāna is. Very gently, the energy aligns and you just do it. It's a relief. It's not about willpower. It's not personal. It's not about "I'm doing it." It's a relief.

And so that day when I recognized that, I thought, oh, right. It's so obvious. When I start with "should I," I can just know: adhiṭṭhāna. I'm going to do it. Oh yeah, adhiṭṭhāna. The mind collects, you just get up and do it.

Play with that here on retreat. You can see how it really supports our practice. It's simple. Notice places where you're dithering. We can rationalize anything, you know. But notice you're rationalizing. We'll get to that.

For example—I think maybe this morning, it all blends—but yes, when Dawn was talking about the precepts and saying, I felt the last one is like, if you wake up in the morning and it's half an hour early, but you're really awake. "No, I don't have to get up. The sitting starts at five. There's no need..." and on and on. Should I, shouldn't I? I roll over. I can see I'm not the only one who's ever done that.

Dithering. Adhiṭṭhāna—you pull it, you get up. That's it. It's so much easier. We think somehow we're being comfortable. This is how we're so deluded. You're lying there for half an hour, and then you finally get up. You're more tired. You don't feel good about yourself. You're rationalizing all the reasons you needed the rest. It's just—oh, yeah—trying to get up is a hundred times easier.

So there are all kinds of ways you can play with this. Steadiness—sometimes as the days go on, take a chunk of time in the morning and just follow the schedule. Just sit, walk, sit, walk. Not "should I walk now, or should I start now?" You just do it.

You don't think about it. It's so much easier, so much calmer. So just play with it.

The "not now" quality—I mean, it's not always available. No wholesome state is always available. But learning to recognize it, I always wish I'd learned about it more. It wasn't talked about too much in my early years of practice. As we get more familiar with the wholesome states, we can just bring them up. As someone has said, wisdom mind inclines to the wholesome. When wisdom is present, when there's mindfulness and wisdom, it's almost like you ask yourself: would you rather be with wholesome determination, or would you rather be with wanting and dithering? Wisdom will choose the wholesome if you just give it half a chance. Start to tune into that, because on retreat it's very supportive.

And it can help—though it's different from striving. It can move into striving and a determined "No, I have to do this, I should do it." And then it doesn't feel so wholesome anymore.

So there are four qualities that come with adhiṭṭhāna. Adhiṭṭhāna, this sense of the collectedness of mind and just doing it, is what's called in the Abhidhamma an "ethically variable" quality. That means you could have this quality of getting the mind collected and doing something, but you could do something unwholesome with that. It's ethically variable, depending on what other qualities are present in the mind. But as a pāramī, it's wholesome.

This quality of adhiṭṭhāna, as I've been talking about it, comes together with and is supported by wisdom. This is from the suttas: it says adhiṭṭhāna comes together with four qualities—discernment, a quality of wisdom; truthfulness; relinquishment; and calm.

I'll just say a little about each. Discernment is somewhat obvious. The sense of having a determination, a sense of what I'm going to do, what needs to be done, bringing it together—there needs to be discernment that the conditions are appropriate, supportive for that. The example I think of is the Buddha. The story goes that when he sat down under the Bodhi tree, he made this strong determination: "I don't get up until I completely awaken." Well, he'd been doing really strenuous—beyond strenuous—renunciate practice for six years before he took that determination and sat under the Bodhi tree. So somehow he had a sense that the conditions were supportive for that.

This is the discernment, the wisdom of really seeing what is. We don't always know, but we look carefully at what's supportive. For example, if I were to say now, "I'm going to go into the staff dining room, sit down, go into the fourth jhāna, and not get up for two days"—the conditions of my mind and body at the moment would not make that possible with some discernment. I'm exaggerating, but not really. For some people, that would be possible. It's not an impossible thing. But for me, at this moment, that wouldn't be adhiṭṭhāna. That would be some stupid expectation—stupid because I know better.

So discernment. You bring in: Is it realistic? Discernment takes some ability to look at what the conditions actually are. If you make a clear resolution that in this sitting you're not going to have any thoughts anymore—mostly, there could be a time when that might be possible, but for most of us, it's not. It's a wish. It turns into willpower, into striving. Adhiṭṭhāna isn't just deciding you're going to do something and doing it. It's this quality of seeing what's realistic.

But I could sit and walk every morning and try that for a week. And then when I don't feel like doing it—no, just do it and don't dither. You could do that. So explore for yourself.

The first quality that supports adhiṭṭhāna is wisdom, this discernment.

to assess realistically. And the second aspect is truthfulness. Truthfulness helps you see what's really possible, but also simply not kidding ourselves. You know what I mean? "Oh yes, I'm making this resolution, but I can't really do it. I'm too tired," whatever it is. Truthfulness is just being truthful with ourselves, not kidding ourselves, discerning realistically, and seeing as clearly as we can.

Relinquishment, of course—whenever the adhiṭṭhāna says "just get up," you're relinquishing lolling around in bed. When I say I'm going to sit, walk, sit, walk for the morning, I'm relinquishing doing other things. Relinquishment doesn't have to be suffering. It's not a suffering state, but it's just recognizing that to just do it, to bring all the energy in line in a certain way, is relinquishing doing something else. That's just obvious. But noticing that comes with it.

And the fourth—that all of these together bring—is calming. Working with and noticing adhiṭṭhāna, it's like you just do it. As I described with the qigong, it brings calm to the heart and mind. Not an incredible calm necessarily, but all that back and forth—should I, shouldn't I—the unease, the confusion, the wondering, the worry, that drops out. You just do the thing. It doesn't have to be a pleasant thing. It may be that fears are coming up and "how do I work with it?" Just be with it. It's like this. It's scary. It's unpleasant. But the adhiṭṭhāna, the determination, lets us be with it without fluctuating too much. So it's really supportive and it really brings calm.

This is not a should. None of this is a should. But start to tune into this as a wholesome quality of heart and mind that's available to us, that really supports our practice. And when we use aspiration and bright faith, this resolve comes out of that. It really supports us to continue with our practice.

This appears in another place in the suttas as well: adhiṭṭhāna comes with wisdom, it strengthens faith, and that brings energy. The Buddha said these circle around and support one another—wisdom, faith, energy, and commitment all circle around and support one another.

I just wanted to offer that for you to explore. And back to the beginning, I want to say again: don't be shy about aspiration, about really acknowledging to yourself what's truly important to you. Don't get into all the "me" and "it's not possible" and all of that. That's just story. What's really important to you? And remember, the path is lifelong. Everything in our life is part of the path.

I want to read this from Ajahn Chah:

The Dhamma that we need to see and to know can be seen right here within us, every moment of every day. We ask, "When will we see the Dhamma?" But it is right here, to be seen in the present. In a nutshell, the point of the teaching of the Buddha is to transform one's view. It is possible for it to change. It only requires looking at things and then it happens. These things are right here. We don't need to look up at the sky or down at the earth.

And back to: "The Dhamma that we need to see and to know can be seen right here within us, every moment of every day."

And from His Holiness the Dalai Lama: "One day, you will become bodhisattvas in reality. So whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

And as the Buddha said, don't settle for anything less than the sure heart's release.

Thank you for your attention.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.