Adhiṭṭhāna: Resolution and Determination

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:23

I decided to talk about adhiṭṭhāna—resolution and determination—tonight after it came to my mind this morning. Then, just talking with people in interviews today, perhaps because my mind was already inclined that way, it seemed like something I could see happening in people's minds. It's been a particular interest of mine. It's a mental factor, and it's been very interesting and useful for me in the last few years of my life as I've explored it. So I wanted to share that because I've been finding it very helpful.

Resolution or determination—adhiṭṭhāna in Pali—is one of the ten pāramīs, the ten wholesome qualities of mind and heart that, according to the mythology, the Bodhisatta developed over all the eons and lifetimes, bringing these ten beautiful qualities to perfection. Determination is one of them.

Determination is a very interesting quality, both in its vastness, as I mentioned this morning, and in specific moment-to-moment experience. The recognition of this wholesome quality in our mind, in our heart, as part of our meditation experience, is enormously helpful, as well as in our daily life, of course.

To talk about determination, resolution, or steadiness of purpose—these are a few different definitions. From Situgu Sayadaw, who's a prominent Sayadaw in Burma: adhiṭṭhāna can be regarded as a foundation for all of the pāramīs, for all of the perfections, because without a firm resolution, a firm determination, one cannot fulfill the other pāramīs. Of course, without some kind of resolution or determination, none of us would still be sitting here, would we? I mean this seriously.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu has talked quite a bit about it. He says it gives focus, motivation, and direction to our practice, if we're specifically thinking about our practice. And A.H. Almaas, who's not Buddhist, describes it as the quality of being unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement. Some of these descriptions might sound similar to vīriya, to energy, and I'll talk about the differences and similarities in a minute.

So: unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement, giving focus, motivation, and directness to the practice or to our life, and a foundational force for all the pāramīs, for all of our practice.

Let me describe it in vast proportions over time—this broad determination, broad resolve, broad aspiration. As I mentioned this morning, there's the period of the so-called Buddha before the historical Gautama Buddha that we know actually existed. I'm quoting from a very esteemed and revered scholar of Buddhism, Mr. Guy Armstrong. To use his language, four incalculables and 100,000 eons before our present age—which is to say a very, very long time ago. It sort of sounds like a fairy tale, right? A very long time ago, in a distant age.

There was an ascetic named Sumedha who was practicing to become an arahat. That was his aspiration, his resolve. He heard that there was a Buddha, a self-awakened one named Dīpaṅkara Buddha, in another village. He went to hear him. And basically, just in beginning to see, to hear Dīpaṅkara Buddha, Sumedha was so inspired—as is the case in these stories—just with the Buddha's wisdom, his brightness, his dignity, that spontaneously, but very profoundly, there arose in him the realization that, sure, if he became an arahat, completely awakened, that would certainly be for his own benefit and the benefit of many others he would meet. But if he actually resolved to become a Buddha in some future time, that would benefit so many more people, so much more.

So out of a sense of great inspiration and great compassion, this spontaneous, deep resolve—adhiṭṭhāna determination—arose: to do whatever it would take to become a Buddha in a future life. That was this strong resolve spreading over four incalculables and 100,000 eons. That's a long time. That one vastness of determination, of course, has to be backed up by moment after moment after moment of determination arising in the mind and heart. I'll come back to how he had to do that in a minute as I talk about it with us.

As the story goes, Sumedha noticed the Buddha was about to walk through some mud, so he flung his body down so that the Buddha and all the Saṅgha could walk over him and not get muddy. This called him to Dīpaṅkara Buddha's attention—in a good way. And Dīpaṅkara Buddha recognized, could tell from looking into the ascetic's mind, that in fact he would become a Buddha in a future age. Had Sumedha not made that resolution, he would have become an arahat right there and then. So that's how these things end happily.

That's the story in vast proportions. But you can see in smaller vast proportions—whatever particular resolve or determination, whatever you could call adhiṭṭhāna aspiration for our own life, for our own practice. I'll come back to that at the end, just to hold that as a possibility.

We don't just have to mush around, hoping something nice happens. We can really have a sense of purpose and direction. And this is not antithetical to all the instructions we've been giving all the time, which is why this has been helpful to me.

So a lot of what I want to do is talk about recognizing the quality of resolve, of determination, in our mind now—much like we recognize the seven factors of awakening. We've talked about these other factors, how when we recognize a wholesome factor and understand with wisdom how it works, and we begin to incline our mind towards it, we can actually call on it in times when it's appropriate and really strengthen that quality. So how to recognize it in our own minds is really important, because it gives us the perseverance, the courage in life and in practice to keep going.

As we've talked a lot about viriya, energy, it's quite a strong quality, but it's not striving. You've gotten that, right? I mean, we've said that. We have said that, right, once or twice. So enormous energy can be put out. It isn't striving. It's not meant to be willpower. It's not expectation trying to make anything in particular happen—which is quite difficult for us, how to put out intense energy without any idea of result at all. It

just doesn't really compute, but that's what we talk about.

And at the same time we talk about this energy, we also talk about relax, observe, allow—the mindfulness of whatever arises, what we talk about as choiceless awareness. Not even the attention, but choiceless awareness, the sense of—and I say it myself all the time—that awareness doesn't care what's happening. That is just really learning to radically trust awareness rather than trying to shape or manipulate our experience. We say all these things and mean them.

And I know at times it can turn into something else. When we're not striving, but we're so afraid of striving, or we can almost be so careful not to turn our energy into expectation or some view—which I know I went on about all last week, not to have any view of what should happen—it can kind of turn into almost a sense of, "Well, just whatever happens is happening. And anything I do is striving or wanting or goal-oriented or manipulating. So just lie down and let it roll over." And how to find that balance? How do you use skillful means? How do we cultivate the wholesome? How do we recognize the klesha, even like with our attention, as Guy was saying, even meeting it fully with our attention without hating it, without wanting something different, without identifying—but at the same time without just giving up?

You know, Larry Rosenberg, who is really very, very funny at times, he used to talk about how sometimes we just get so like, "Don't give anything any trouble. We should massage the kleshas. Just let them be comfortable. Don't get upset." And so we can go on this side of just fluffing around, not really knowing how to bring clarity and strength and power to the viriya without using wanting and anger.

Mostly when we think about how to do something with a lot of force, that's when we can come with ill will, with anger. I think Joseph said sometimes anger feels good—the sense of energy, the sense of our attention, our energy is all collected and focused. And by gum, we can do something. Unfortunately, what we're doing isn't just the thing we're doing. We're cultivating aversion and suffering. But that's a sidetrack.

So to learn that there can be enormous collectedness of energy, resolution to really do something clearly, in a wholesome way that's not kleshas. You all know this. It's not like some magic thing, but just to really bring our attention to it, so I want to talk about it.

A simple example, which we've often said: when the patterns of thought are coming again and again, seven thousand times you've seen them. We've talked about this a lot. I will not go to Cowboy Dharma. But just to say, "Not now." That sense of "not now"—you know what it is? When it's not aversion, it's not fear, and it's not kind of wimpy "not now," but this real sense of, "No, I don't need to go there." You've had that experience, right? At least once, something starts in your mind: "No, I don't need to go there." And sometimes, some people were telling me today, it's amazing.

No, I'm not going there. And the whole thing just goes away. You're like, what? You really didn't need to go there. It's amazing.

That's a quality of determination. Or one way I explore it: you're really tired at night, and the metta sitting

is over, and your mind is saying, "Oh, just go to bed." But there's this sense where you just make a simple resolve in the moment: I'm just going to do one more walking meditation for twenty minutes. You're not making some huge lifetime commitment, but just this sense of, "No, I'll just do it."

And that's really what it feels like. Just do it. It's not like, "Oh, I'll walk," and then you start walking, and every minute it's, "Should I or shouldn't I? I'm really tired. Maybe I should go to bed. No, I'll keep walking. No, should I or shouldn't I? Why am I doing it?" And you go, "By God, I'll just do it! I don't care!" And you stomp up and down. Neither of those are determination, right? They're not.

But that sense of just do it. And then whatever comes up in the twenty minutes comes up. You're tired. You're dizzy. You're aversive. You're yawning. You're incredibly filled with light and contentment. Whatever comes up, you just do it. There's not all that dithering. There's not all that wavering, this or that, all that energy that gets just blown away. It's all collected in the simplicity of just doing. You don't have to think about it anymore. And there's that simple willingness to be there. That's what I mean by the quality of determination, of adhiṭṭhāna.

One way of noticing how it feels—because this quality of determination, when we talk about it in terms of the Abhidhamma, in terms of different mental factors—it's one of those factors that's so-called ethically variable. We've talked about others, like concentration, for example. This means in itself it's not either wholesome or unwholesome, but it takes on the quality of the other factors that are in that moment of citta, that moment of psyche, that come together with it as determined by it.

So the quality that adhimokkha has as an energy, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome—this is the definition from the Abhidhamma—literally, I like it because I can feel this in my mind when I imagine it. Literally, this quality is the releasing of the mind onto the object. So it's like a quality of decision or resolution. It's not, "Should I go there or should I not go there?" It just releases. It just lands there. So it has the characteristic of conviction and it manifests as decisiveness. And I think really the best slogan for it is just do it. It's Nike's "Just do it." Sayadaw U Tejaniya really likes that. In fact, he has a big picture of the Nike swoosh, and sometimes he'll just hold that up for people. Just do it.

You see how that could be wholesome or unwholesome. So here we want to bring it into the realm of the wholesome, the skillful. Just do it.

So how do we recognize it as a wholesome state, as a skillful state? One aspect of how it feels—this is my experience, and then I'll talk about some ways Sayadaw U Tejaniya describes it. One way it feels is you can sense how the energy, the mental energy, just kind of comes together. It aligns. It doesn't have to be super heavy or strong, but it just comes all together, and there's a sense of calmness.

A sense of peace accompanies it. You just give attention to that, you just do it.

Here's a very simple example: in bed in the morning. The bell goes off, or you wake up—even better—at four, and you're awake, sort of. And the mind is going, "Should I get up, or shouldn't I get up? I could get

up, I'm pretty awake, but then I'll be tired later." You know what I'm saying. Back and forth, dithering. Should I or shouldn't I? Is it good for me or not good for me? However long we're there going back and forth trying to analyze—just what I call dithering—it leads to a loss of energy, a kind of doubt, a kind of vacillation, a kind of weakness in the mind.

I've noticed this almost every day of my life when I have to get up. It's not my favorite moment. That one moment in the day is not my favorite. I'm not one of these "Yes, another day!" people. I know some people like that. But I really learned this, and it's amazing. The lying there, the "should I" and "how do I feel" and "five more minutes"—all of that is not pleasant. When I just tune into the quality of determination, which is simply "get up," it's really like that. All the energy comes together. It's not a "should." It's not aversion. It's not judgment. It's just: get up. Instead of the energy going into all those other thoughts, it all comes together and I just get up. It's just like that. It really is just like that.

It's not like that's some wonderful thing. But watching that quality—it's just a simple moment, not a big deal—and learning to recognize it, and then learning that we can actually call on it. The mind is much more trainable than you might believe sitting here. We can learn to recognize the wholesome, incline the mind toward the wholesome. And wholesome brings other wholesome factors, and they strengthen. That's the whole gist of meditation practice, right? Of the bojjhangas, the factors of enlightenment. And with this as well. So learning simply to recognize it.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about the four qualities that come together when determination is wholesome, when it functions as a pāramī. It comes together with wisdom, with paññā, with some sense of clear seeing. It doesn't have to be the wisdom of an arahant, but the wisdom of clear seeing in that moment. Then with truth, truthfulness, sacca, honesty. With relinquishment, non-clinging. And with calm or peace in the mind. A clear, wise resolve comes together with these things.

Let me give you a very simple example so it doesn't sound so abstruse. Say you make a simple resolve here on retreat. Out of a sense of wisdom, you think, "I really would like to work with studying continuity a little bit." Now, it's wisdom rather than wanting, or comparing what someone else is doing, or thinking "my mindfulness stinks today so I've got to do something better." But in a balanced mind, you make a resolve: "Okay, the 8:15 sitting in the morning until lunch—I'm just going to be very steady. I'm going to sit. When I'm done with the sitting, I'm going to go walk. When I'm done with walking, I go sit. I'm going to really work with steadiness of attention in the so-called transition times and make that my resolve." It's not that you can resolve to be mindful every moment—that would not be wisdom, discerning wisdom. But "I'm going to resolve to really use this time like that for this week."

So that's, by the way, not a bad idea. That's a resolve that could be made with wisdom, depending on your particular circumstances—coming out of a sense of the value of mindfulness and where you're at in your practice.

And then in terms of working with the resolve, we meet ourselves with this sense of truthfulness, which is

one of the other paramis. In other words, mindfulness has this quality of truthfulness anyway, just recognizing things as they are. So it's kind of like we don't kid ourselves. We don't say, "Well, I'm going to do that starting at 10, but first, just today, I really need a nap. But then tomorrow at 10 o'clock I'll start it." And then the next day we conveniently forgot we took a nap, and we really think we've been doing it. Little stuff like that. Just noticing, so that we have a sense of truthfulness to ourselves—not to anybody else—to really look and see what we're doing. And if somehow we can't do it, really can't do it, then keep bringing in the mindfulness, the truthfulness, and see why. Sometimes we do have to make adjustments.

The relinquishment is obvious. Relinquishment is just really non-clinging. When we have a particular sense of resolve or determination, of course we don't cling to the other activities that we give up in that time. We don't cling to all the other things that we wish we were doing. And if mental states come up of "Oh, just be nice to yourself and go have a tea," we don't cling to those either. We see it, we acknowledge it, and we just stay with our resolve.

What comes when it's a wise resolve, and we're meeting it with truthfulness and wisdom and non-clinging, is that it comes with a sense of calm, a sense of peace. If we're making a resolve and in really trying to do it we're getting more and more agitated, more and more upset, or more self-hatred, or more aversion, or more restlessness, there's something off about it. It's not as wise or as clear, or the motivation—maybe we're not quite seeing clearly.

For example, one obvious example: the smaller for Siddhartha Gotama Buddha in at least our historical era, before he became the Buddha. When he made that resolve, after all his years of very ascetic practice and all the things he'd been through, the night of his enlightenment, supposedly he sat under the Bodhi tree and made that resolve, right? "I will not get up until I've completely made an end of suffering"—or however he said it to himself.

I've always thought that is really interesting. That's a very powerful resolve. And then there's the story about all the armies of Mara and all the doubt and everything he went through. But what I think is interesting is that he had been through how many eons of lifetimes as a Bodhisatta, and how much very sincere, intensive practice in that lifetime before he sat under that tree and made that resolve. So there was a sense of discerning wisdom—he knew in some way that was a reasonable, a possible resolve. It was made at the right time, with a sense of the broader situation.

And that can cut both ways. I don't want to tell you don't make a strong resolve. If you feel it's time for you to sit under the Bodhi tree—we could sit under this one—and make that resolve and not get up until you're really free, and you have some sense that's possible, I don't want to squash that. On the other hand, for me, I know if I was to do that, it probably doesn't feel like it would quite be based in discerning wisdom. That's certainly not tonight, based on—you know what I mean? And it's not to put oneself down. It's just to see clearly what's possible.

Another way we can notice with smaller resolves: say you're feeling your mind, your body's incredibly

restless. You're just that kind of restless all over, thoughts going everywhere. You come in and you sit down, and you make the resolve, "I'm just going to be with this. Mindfulness can be with it however it comes." I'm sure we've all made resolves like that.

Now, in terms of it really being a resolve, the resolve isn't "I'm going to sit here and the restlessness will go away." That's not from discerning wisdom because that's not in our control. But to sit and say, "Okay, I'm just gonna sit here, and as Jack Kornfield says, I'll be the first person to die of restlessness, but I'll just sit here and be with it"—that's the resolve that could be from wisdom.

And how you know that it's from wisdom, not from wanting or from ego? Because we could come in and sit down and say the same thing, but it's got that aversion behind it. Or it's got that "By God, I can do it—if that person there can do it, I can do it." And it feels like resolve, but it's tinged with kilesa. It's tinged with me-ing and my-ing, and "so that" and "in order to" and wanting and aversion. And the two experiences will be very different in that case.

So with the sense of resolve, "I'm just going to be with this," it gives the courage, the strength, that alignment of the mind to just be here.

And there's a calmness with it. The restlessness isn't calm, but the mind isn't caught in that spiral of "Oh my God, there's no way I can do this. This is impossible. Maybe I should get up." All that dithering—it's just not there. And when it comes up, that's simply included in the resolve, just part of the difficulty that we stay with for this sitting.

But when it seems like resolve yet it's really willpower or aversion, there won't be that kind of calm. There won't be that peace. It will be more and more and more of a struggle. This doesn't mean we weren't really sincere when we made a resolve and it's tinged with klesha. As we know, we just can't always tell. So this is how we learn. This isn't to say you're right or you're wrong, or that you can't make a good resolve because this is just another way that you're hopeless. It's to really explore and see, to learn when it's wholesome and when it's not, so we can call on this—not only in our retreat, but in our lives. Really, this is the discerning wisdom, the willingness to look.

And we can call on it. As I said, I've been exploring this a lot in practice too, but also in my life. Just to give you an example—it was really a strong example for me of working with resolution as a factor in my mind.

A couple of years ago, I had taken a few months off, some for retreat, but I also managed to carve out three weeks where I could—for some reason I've always wanted to study German. So I had arranged three weeks at the Goethe Institute in München. It was hard to organize all of that. My German was essentially non-existent. I was staying with a friend, and given all the variables, I was joining a month-long class but coming a week late, which they'd given me permission to do.

You take this little test, and I knew a little bit of German here and there from all my years traveling there and from my friends, but completely without structure, without grammar—just a little of this and that. So

they gave me some tests and placed me not in the beginner's class, which was a big mistake, but in the second level. And then I came in a week late.

So I arrived thinking, "La la, this is going to be fun." And I walk in, and the age range in that class was sixteen to twenty-three—and me. These kids were all there gung-ho to study, already a week into it. And it's all conducted entirely in German.

I was sitting there with no clue. No clue what the teacher was talking about. I couldn't follow what we were doing in the workbooks. I was transported back into the horrors of school—only worse, because I was always okay in school. But this was like, "Oh my God, I don't know what they're talking about. I don't know what they're doing." And I have to ask these kids for help, kids who don't want to talk to granny. They just want to talk to each other about drinking beer in the English Garden on the weekend. That was really all they talked about. We didn't have much in common.

So the first day, I was just blown away. But then I'd go off and work and work and work. Then I'd come back the next day. And it was really fascinating to see the junk that came up in my mind. I thought, "Wow, I didn't know this stuff could still be triggered." Some days it was really awful. Some days I kind of enjoyed it. Then I'd try to say something in class, and I was the worst speaker because I really hadn't learned how to speak.

Anyway, I just kept going like that. And after two or three days, I'd get up in the morning and think, "Why am I doing this? It's totally for me. Nobody else in the world cares if I do this. If I never go down there again, none of them will care."

Why am I putting myself through this?

But I called on resolution and said, no. First of all, I just really wanted to do it. And whatever I do, I'm going to learn. Just go through with it. So if it's a little difficult, so what? So unpleasant mind states come up, so what? I gave myself a little talking to, and I got clear—yeah, I do really want to do it.

And so then every morning, I'd get up and I would just sit there and call in resolution. And all the "should I go or shouldn't I go" would just fall away. I made the resolution that not only would I go every day, I would never leave early, I would never miss class. And I did. I did every single thing. And I did learn a lot. No, I still can't speak German. But the main thing I learned—it was an amazing kind of retreat for me about the power of resolution in the mind. Not just to do something, but the calmness that comes with it, the clarity, just a sense of, "Yes, now this is what I'm doing." Some days it was fun, some days it wasn't, but whatever comes up is just the practice. We bring the mindfulness, we bring the resolution to it, and we go through it.

There's always going to be obstacles, obstructions, difficulties. Whatever comes up, as you know, is the path. And resolution's like, "Oh, okay." It was such a wonderful support and tool to call on. And it's really palpable—you can really experience it. So I just want to offer that. The more we get to use it, the more we

can call on it here in our practice as well.

And as you'll have noticed, we really need it here sometimes, right? Pretty much everybody. Once in a while, someone has a retreat that's mostly calm, blissful, happy, and they don't feel like they need resolution. That's wonderful for that retreat. But it can set up a lot of suffering for later retreats. It really can.

I have a dear friend—I haven't seen him in years—but his first retreat was like that. And the next ten years were filled with so much suffering because he never had a retreat, or even a day of practice, that came anywhere close to that first one. Because you think that's how it's supposed to be, right? And everything else just seems hopeless. It's just supposed to be cruising. Well, mostly it's not.

As you'll have noticed, there are times for all of us in almost every retreat—and not just in retreat, but in our life—where it gets really difficult for a whole variety of reasons, with a whole variety of experiences. It can feel like we've just hit a wall. Maybe our expectations aren't being met. There are a lot of reasons.

But the commitment we're making to this radical mindful awareness, this sense of radical presence with whatever arises in our mind, in our body, in our heart, moment to moment—as maybe you've seen, it can take us to places we never would have expected. Some beautiful, some really confusing, some where you can't imagine there's any way this could be useful, wallowing around in this stuff.

And so, of course, we need mindfulness and viriya and faith and confidence. But here is where resolution is a quality we can really call on. When our sense of safety net—I like to call it that—starts to fray or starts to fall away. The safety net can be just the way you've gotten comfortable being in your life, even if it's not a happy way; we're comfortable with it. Or on retreat, there can be what I call a comfort zone.

There are all kinds of ways we keep falling into a comfort zone. Maybe it's how long you sit, or how much you sit and walk, or what time you have tea, or how much you sleep, or who you can sit next to at lunch and who you can't. Or where you do your walking. Or what mental states are acceptable and workable and which ones are not. Or just our little habits that we get into and don't even recognize. The views, of course, which I talked about last week—and how when our comfort zone starts to fray, how unsettling that can be, how difficult.

We're all going to come upon times—and hopefully more than once, hopefully even often, and I mean that hopefully—where we're hitting this wall, where our mind thinks, "I can't do this."

Or I don't want to do this. Have you ever come to a place where you say, "If freedom means having to give up *this*, I don't want any part of it"? Have you ever had that? Even if "this" is just the second muffin at breakfast. Sometimes it's that mundane. "If freedom means I have to always watch what I'm eating, to heck with it." That's a silly example, but have you noticed things like that in your mind? Or the mind projects further: "If freedom means I don't have any more attachment to my partner, and I can't be in relationship anymore, and we can't live together anymore—then forget it. I don't want anything to do with

it." We go down some road. "If equanimity means you can't tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant, who wants to live like that? It's all some dull gray. I don't want that." And we subtly pull back.

Or sometimes it's just, "If I have to look at this self-loathing one more time, I'm just going to explode. It's impossible. I can't do it anymore." We all have mental states where we think, "I can't do it anymore." That's just a mental state.

Ajahn Sumedho said something I thought was very funny. He was talking about some really unpleasant experience when he was in Thailand. He said, "This is unbearable. I just can't bear this another moment." Have you ever reached that place?

I remember one practice period in Burma some years ago where this mental state kept arising: "This is completely overwhelming. It's totally overwhelming." Some image would come—I can't remember what—and the thought, "I cannot take another step. It's completely overwhelming." I would totally believe it. And then the tomato would say, "I can't bear this another moment." And then I'd see that I could. You have another moment? Oh yeah. Okay. Well, I could just be with this another moment.

After some point with that overwhelming state, I suddenly realized something. Because I'd ask, "What's overwhelming?" I didn't even know what was overwhelming. Something was overwhelming. Then I realized: oh, this is just a mental state. "Overwhelm" is a mental state.

So that's the wisdom coming in that can lead to resolution. "Oh, it's a mental state." As soon as I know it's a mental state, I know from my own experience that a mental state is a combination of thoughts and mental feelings and physical concomitants. Whatever the mental state is, it comes, it goes. And I can be with it. I know that. As soon as I saw that, there's the resolution coming: "Okay, overwhelming. This really feels overwhelming. It still feels overwhelming. But the resolution can just be with it."

So I often ask myself when that comes in—"Oh, this is unbearable"—I say, "Well, what actually is unbearable about this?"

That's a question that just directs the attention back in. Okay, you can just see it. A very simple form of resolve.

Or sometimes, as I said last time, the sense of hitting the wall comes when we are starting to experience the unfamiliar in our practice—that familiar sense of who we are, our personality patterns. And sometimes when what we would think is a freeing insight arises, you walk into a situation, say in the dining room, where normally you would be filled with self-consciousness and embarrassment, and you walk in and it's just not there at all. There's just seeing and hearing and smelling, and there's no sense of "me" at all. And the actual experience is just a relief. That burden, that exhaustion of self-creation over and over again isn't happening.

And then something clicks in and says, "Oh no, how could I live my life like that? What about me?" We

want to put on that old coat again that's so familiar, so comfortable. It's almost like we want to go back to the garden, the so-called pleasure garden, even though it wasn't so pleasurable. What about—who will I be if that impatience goes away? How will I be if I don't have this suffering story to relate to anymore? As Poonjaji used to say, you don't have to carry your whole past around with you on your shoulder like a corpse. Just being alive and fresh in the moment—but then who am I?

Chögyam Trungpa had a wonderful phrase: "nostalgia for samsara." I want it back. It's so familiar. And we're all going to hit places like that. This is where resolve—just learning how to have the resolve to stay with it without knowing where it goes—is so important. Because freedom from clinging, the freedom the Buddha's talking about, radical moment-to-moment awareness, it really is uncompromising. And with all of our best intentions and all that we've read, and I'm including myself in this, and all that we know, our mind really can't imagine that from what we know now. It can't.

We want to know what we're going to experience and how it's going to be and what it means—to get a landscape ahead of time, which to some extent is helpful. But at the ultimate level, each moment has to be completely fresh, opening to the unknown. And in the moment when there's the resolve and the clarity and the wisdom to do it, it's so freeing. But in the moments when there's not quite that, when we want to know, it just freaks us out. I want to know what's going on. Don't tell me I can't. I want some sense of certainty.

And so that's when bringing in the sense of resolution—not about an expectation of what will happen, but just this sense of the broad aspiration—helps us recognize that these scary experiences, these difficult experiences, these uncomfortable experiences, these not-knowing experiences, whatever comes from the inside or the outside, this is what's happening now, and so it's part of our path. It's all part of our path.

We never know. In each of us, our own path shows up different from everybody else. That's why māna—comparing and conceit—is so subtle. We all experience it a lot. But it just makes no sense. What's happening in this particular mind-stream at this moment is different from what's happening in that one, or that one, or that one, or yours yesterday compared to today. But we compare because we want some kind of certainty. No, just this.

So we never know how our path will go. But the determination—both in the bigger sense of aspiration and then bringing that into the willingness to just show up with courage, not shrinking back from whatever happens, whether external circumstances or internal—is a wonderful support on our path. And we couldn't do without it.

I want to tell you a little story from someone whose determination really inspired me when I read his autobiography. He's a Chan master, Master Sheng Yen. He died about three years ago. He was Chinese, originally from mainland China, but fled to Taiwan in 1949 when the communists won the Civil War. I sat with him a bit in Switzerland and a bit at his place here in upstate New York. He's huge in Taiwan—sort of like the Dalai Lama of Taiwan. But we didn't realize that meeting him here, because he was so simple.

Loving—he just had the most loving, relational heart. Very interested in each person, very kind, very thoughtful, very simple. Just this wonderful being. And then we find out later he's a huge scholar, has tens of thousands of followers in Taiwan. A wonderful being.

And so when I read his autobiography, he talks about his life very straightforwardly. He was born in great poverty in China, again in the twenties or thirties, I don't remember exactly—very, very poor, a lot of privation. He became a Buddhist monk quite young, partly because he had no way to eat, no place to live. But he was very committed, really very inspired by being a Buddhist monk.

From the twenties and thirties onward, there was civil war in China—great hardship, often nothing to eat, lots of privation. In 1949, when the Civil War ended and the Communists took over, he realized that no one was going to be allowed to remain a monk and the monasteries were being destroyed. The only way he could get out and get to Taiwan was if he joined the Taiwanese army, because then they would give him transportation to Taiwan.

So here he was, a deeply committed Buddhist monk, but he knew he couldn't remain one if he stayed in China. So he did what he needed to do—he joined the Taiwanese army and went to Taiwan.

But it wasn't so simple. He was very committed to nonviolence, and so he ended up with a job where he didn't have to perform violence. He was committed to that. But he couldn't get out of the army. It wasn't like he could get over there and say, "Okay, thanks you guys, now I'm checking out." He couldn't leave. And it was well over ten years.

But he said the whole time, he was very clear: in my mind, in my heart, I was always a monk. He couldn't wear the monk's robes, but in his mind, he lived as a monk to the best of his ability while performing his duties.

To him, being a monk meant being a vegetarian. So usually he would never eat meat, which meant that he was almost starving much of the time, and he had very poor health. He would also use discerning wisdom—he was flexible enough to see when he was actually starving and his health was so bad that he was going to die, and then he would eat a little meat. But he took that on as having performed something that was unwholesome, unskillful. Later, when he was finally able to get out of the army, for him doing prostrations was a great way of purifying heart and mind. So he did endless prostrations to purify what he thought were his unwholesome actions. That was his commitment, his way.

After ten years of having no teacher, no other support to be a monk—living as a secret monk in the army—he found a way out. And he said, looking back, "I realized that if I did not have a very strong determination to stay a monk and to return to monastic life, I probably would not have succeeded, because getting out of my particular branch of the military service was nearly impossible."

But he had such dedication. He would spend every little short vacation going to find a Buddhist master and studying at a monastery in Taiwan, even though it was very, very difficult. An amazing being. When

he finally got out, he went into six years of retreat in a cave on his own, and then became this great scholar. Great determination—but the softest, kindest, most loving person. Very, very inspiring to me, this quality of aspiration and determination.

As Thanissaro Bhikkhu says—for me that story highlights this point from Thanissaro Bhikkhu—in terms of determination, the importance of establishing wise priorities or aspirations in our practice, in our life, and then staying true to them regardless of the temptations to sacrifice them for lesser ends. This is personal for each of us. Skillful determination begins with discernment, with wisdom, and continues with it in making wise decisions.

I want to encourage all of us not to shrink from this, not to feel too caught in a sense of self and shrink back from really having a sense of what a deep and wise determination, resolution, aspiration might be for you in your life, in your practice.

As Thanissaro says, it really is important to establish a clear aspiration and then call on determination, which strengthens our energy, which strengthens our mindfulness, which leads to wisdom. And when we see, "Oh, I really can do this," our faith gets stronger again. That faith gives us confidence and willingness to act, which gives determination and mindfulness. It all circles around and supports each other. The wholesome factors bring each other along; each supports the next.

Having a sense of what is really your deep resolve, your determination—I think it's so important. You're working so hard here. And I imagine—I know for me—there are certainly times when you're putting in everything you've got, but you forget why you're doing it. It gets kind of dry and dull, or we're doing it to get more mindful. Why? Why exactly do I want to be more mindful?

And sometimes having that larger sense helps with the resolution—not to get there, but to come back, to be present with this moment now. It gives us the determination. Tejaniya likes to say, "Never give up." Never give up doesn't mean holding to an expectation. It means whatever arises, not to settle just for something good enough. "Okay, that's enough practice. That's good enough. I'm not suffering as much as I was. Let's go home." I used to do that a lot. Then you find out, guess what? It comes with you.

But never give up. Moment by moment, really bringing that quality of determination. As the Buddha said—a couple of things he said—two things I never lost sight of: not to shrink from the struggle, not to shrink from the path, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind. These wholesome states of mind are great, but not to rest contented.

So for all of us, having a sense of what the greater aspiration is gives us this determination to keep aligning ourselves with it. And whatever comes up is our path, and it will be different. What my path is differs from anyone else's.

Another story I love about determination and path—probably some of you have seen this video made a few years ago with Tsoknyi Rinpoche and some Western women who went to visit nuns in Tibet, called

the Nangchen nuns, that Tsoknyi Rinpoche had historically been taking care of.

During the Cultural Revolution—those twenty years—these nuns had a monastery way up high in Tibet. Of course, in the Cultural Revolution, the nunnery was destroyed, and the nuns had to disperse. Different things happened for different ones of them. Some of the nuns died. Some were put into work camps. Some went back to their nomadic families. Some managed to flee high up into caves.

All of them, though, in their different ways—because they came back together after those twenty years—in their different ways, they described how in their path, in their heart, similar to Master Sheng Yen, they kept their path of being a nun. The ones who went back and lived at home had to disrobe. They couldn't out loud do any of their chanting or any of their practices because the communists were so on the alert that they would be arrested, their families would be arrested. So they were being secret nuns, nuns in hiding, but secretly they were keeping their practice, their determination going. Same with the ones in the work camps. The ones who went way, way high up into the caves had incredible privation. Some starved to death. Many were incredibly ill. But in whatever way, whatever circumstances came, the sense of determination was just flexible with the circumstances, while really holding true to what is the key, what's the most important, what helps them wake up.

This video was about going back with Tsoknyi Rinpoche to visit the nuns, who were now allowed to return. They were rebuilding this nunnery way, way up high. They're hauling these giant stones by hand and wood up these incredible mountains. I couldn't even walk up the mountain, and they're hauling it up and building the nunnery back again. This is how they were describing their different ways of holding to their aspiration, holding to their determination.

And then each moment, it's moment to moment—how determination, *adhiṭṭhāna*, manifests in relationship to this particular moment, with wisdom, with truthfulness to ourselves, and with an element of calm or peace, because our heart is in alignment with what's really true, with what's really important. And if it's not and we get all confused—great. That's part of the path too. We bring in awareness with that.

My favorite part, of course, is they took at the very end—they allowed the women videoing to go up and see the oldest nun, who they said was the most enlightened of all of them. She was lying in a little bed, and I mean, who knows, she looked 120—maybe she was 40—but she looked really old. She'd had a really hard life, and she couldn't walk anymore, so she just lay in that bed spinning her prayer wheel. One of these beings, you know, that just incredible light beamed out of her eyes, even in the video. She was smiling, and she said, "Well, I just lie here and spin my prayer wheel, and all day and all night, all I do is think: may all beings, wherever they are, may they be happy and liberated."

I thought, wow, what a life. Our lives can take so many different forms. It's not about what it looks like, but don't be afraid to come to whatever resolve is true for you, and then call on all the tools we have, moment by moment, just in this moment, to help us keep aligning. Resolution is an amazing tool.

One from the Dalai Lama. He was talking to some Western monks and nuns, and he looked out and said, "Oh, I see you're really dedicated." He said, "One day you too will become bodhisattvas in reality. And so whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

And that's true for us. Whatever obstacles, however long it takes, do not be discouraged. Just in this moment, we call on resolution.

And this famous passage from the Buddha describing aspects of the third noble truth, one who's awakened. This is not to compare ourselves, but to see that aspirations can go as high as is possible—not just to feel good:

One who has considered all the contrasts of this earth and is no more disturbed by anything in the world, the peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow, and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay. This I call neither arising nor passing away, neither standing still nor being born nor dying. There is neither foothold nor development nor any basis. This is the end of suffering.

Therefore, the purpose of this holy life does not consist in acquiring alms or gain, or in honor or fame. It does not consist in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that is the object of the holy life. That is its essence. That is its goal.

So let's just sit for a moment.

From Dilgo Khyentse:

Do not forget the teacher. Pray to him or her at all times. Do not be carried away by thoughts. Watch the nature of mind. Do not forget death. Persist in Dharma. Do not forget sentient beings. With compassion, dedicate your merit to them.

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