Adhiṭṭhāna: Resolution and Determination

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:00:23

So I decided to talk about adhiṭṭhāna—resolution, determination—tonight after it came to my mind this morning. Then just talking with people in interviews today, maybe because my mind was skewed that way, it seemed like it was 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. I just 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, of heart, that supposedly in the mythology, however you want to frame it, the Bodhisatta developed over all the eons and lifetimes. These ten beautiful qualities of heart and mind were brought to perfection, and determination is one of them.

Determination is a very interesting quality, both in the broad sweep, in the vastness, and then in the 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.

Determination, resolution, or steadiness of purpose—these are a couple of different definitions. From Sitagu 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?

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 Almaas, who's not Buddhist, talks about it as the quality of being unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement. Some of these descriptions you might hear as similar to viriya, 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 serving as a foundational force for all the pāramīs, for all of our practice.

To describe adhiṭṭhāna in vast proportions over time—this broad determination, broad resolve, broad aspiration—I'll tell the story of the period of the so-called Buddha before the historical Gautama Buddha that we know actually existed. To use the language of a very esteemed and revered scholar of Buddhism, Mr. Guy Armstrong: four incalculables and one hundred thousand eons before our present age—which is to say a very, very long time ago. It sort of sounds like a fairy tale, right?

So there was an ascetic named Sumedha who was practicing to become an arahant. That was his aspiration, his resolve. He heard, though—very much like the story of Bāhiya, these stories transpose in different places—that there was a Buddha, a self-awakened one, named Dīpaṅkara Buddha in another village. He went to hear him.

Just in beginning to see and hear Dīpaṅkara Buddha, Sumedha was so inspired—as is the case in these stories—just with his wisdom, his brightness, his dignity, that spontaneously but very profoundly, there arose in him a realization. He saw that sure, if he became an arahant, completely awakened, that would certainly be for his own benefit and the benefit of many others that he would meet. But if he actually resolved to become a Buddha in some future time, that would benefit so many other 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 time. It took four incalculables and one hundred thousand 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 in relation to 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 Sangha could walk over him and not get muddy. That called him to Dīpaṅkara Buddha's attention—in a good way. Dīpaṅkara Buddha recognized and gave a kind of prophecy; he could tell from looking into Sumedha the ascetic's mind that in fact he would become a Buddha in a future age. And had Sumedha not made that resolution, he would have become an arahant 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 just whatever particular resolve or determination—you could call adhiṭṭhāna an 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—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 with these other factors about 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 about, virya—energy—is quite a strong quality, but it's not striving. You've gotten that, right? We have said that, once or twice. Enormous energy can be put out, and it isn't striving. It's not meant to be willpower. It's not expectation, not 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. This is 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're 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." How do we find that balance? How do we use skillful means? How do we cultivate the wholesome? How do we recognize the klesha—even meeting it fully with our attention, as Guy was saying, without hating it, without wanting something different, without identifying, but at the same time without just giving up?

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

Often 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 and energy 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 some magic thing, but just to really bring our attention to 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. 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 a kind of weak "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, as 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 this: 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 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 you're thinking, "Should I or shouldn't I? I'm really tired. Maybe I should go to bed. No, I'll keep walking. Should I or shouldn't I? Why am I doing it?" Or you go, "By God, I'll just do it! I don't care!" And you stomp up and down.

Neither of those is 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, which means in itself it's not either wholesome or unwholesome, but it takes on the quality of the other factors in that moment of citta, that moment of psyche, that come together with it.

So the quality that adhimokkha has as an energy, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome—this is the definition from the Abhidhamma, and 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." Ajahn Ṭhānissaro 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 can see how that could be wholesome or unwholesome. So here we want to bring it into the realm of the wholesome—just do it in a skillful way. So how do we recognize it as a wholesome state, as a skillful state?

One aspect of how it feels—this is my own experience, and then I'll talk about some ways Ajahn Ṭhānissaro describes it. One way it feels is you can sense the energy, the mental energy, just kind of coming 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 that accompanies it. You just give attention to that, you just do it.

Here's a very simple example: being 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. And 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. That one moment in the day is not my favorite moment. 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 really is just like that.

It's not that this is some wonderful thing. But watching that quality—it's just a simple moment, not a big deal. Yet learning to recognize it, and then learning that we can actually call on it, is significant. 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, of the factors of enlightenment. And with this quality as well—learning simply to recognize it.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about the four qualities that come together when determination is wholesome, when it functions as a parami. 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 a 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." 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." In a balanced mind, you make a resolve: the 8:15 sit 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—make that my resolve. It's not that you can resolve to be mindful every moment. That would not be wisdom, not discerning wisdom. But I'm going to resolve to really use this time in that way for this week.

So 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, of course, 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 ten, but first, just today, I really need a nap. Then tomorrow at ten 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—not to anybody else, but to ourselves—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 maybe we're not quite seeing the motivation clearly.

For example, one obvious example—the smaller for the broader—going back to 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 this 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 wouldn't 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, is incredibly restless. You're just that kind of restless all over, thoughts going everywhere. You come in and 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 going to 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 a resolve that could be from wisdom.

And how do you know 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." It feels like resolve, but it's tinged with kilesa. It's tinged with me-ing and my-ing, with "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 up in *oh my God, there's no way I can do this, this is impossible, maybe I should get up*—all that dithering just isn't there. And when it comes up, that's just included in the resolve, just part of the difficulty that we stay with for this sitting.

But when it seems like resolve, but it's really willpower or aversion, there won't be that kind of calm. There won't be that peace. It'll be more and more of a struggle.

This doesn't mean we weren't really sincere when we made a resolve that'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 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 to go to the Goethe Institute in Munich. It was hard to organize all of that. My German was like non-existent. I was staying with a friend. Given the variables, it was a month-long class, but I was coming a week late, which they'd given me permission to do. You take this little test, and I knew a bit of German here and there from all my years going there and from my friends, but I had completely no kind of structure, no grammar—just a little of this and that. They gave me some tests and put me not in the beginner's class, which was a big mistake, but in the second class. And then I came in a week late.

So I walk in thinking this is going to be fun. The age range in that class was sixteen to twenty-three, and me. These kids were all there gung-ho to study, and they were already a week into it. And it's all in German. I was sitting there with no clue—no clue what the teacher was talking about, couldn't follow what we were doing in the workbooks. I was back in the horrors of school. Only worse, because I was always okay in school. 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 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 too much in common.

So the first day I was just blown away. But then I'd go off and work and work and work, and come back the next day. 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 like the worst speaker because I really didn't learn 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 up the 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 just sit there and call in resolution. And all the "should I go or shouldn't I go" would simply go 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. I did learn a lot. No, I still can't speak German. But the main thing I learned was that it became 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, "Yeah, 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

just go through it.

There's always going to be obstacles, obstructions, difficulties. Whatever comes up, as you know, is the path. And resolution is 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 really 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—whatever—and they don't feel like they need resolution. That's wonderful for that retreat, but it sets up a lot of suffering for later retreats. It really can.

I have a dear friend I haven't seen in years, but his first retreat was like that. And the next ten years—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 all the rest is just 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 just gets really difficult. For a whole variety of reasons, with a whole variety of experiences, it can feel like we've just hit the wall. Maybe our expectations aren't being met. There's many reasons, and I'll talk about them in a minute. It's too much dukkha.

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 call up and 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.

So of course we need mindfulness and viriya and faith and confidence and all of that. But here is where resolution is a quality we can really call on. When the sense of our safety net—I like to call it—starts to fray or starts to go 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 kind of safety net, a comfort zone. There are all kinds of ways we can keep falling into a comfort zone—maybe with how long you sit, or how much you alternate sitting and walking, 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 without even recognizing them. The views, of course, which I talked about last week—and how when our comfort zone starts to fray, how really unsettling that can be, how difficult.

We're all going to come upon times—and hopefully more than once, hopefully sometimes even often, and I mean hopefully—where it's like what I call hitting the wall, where our mind thinks either "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 like this. "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, and 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 feeling was, "I cannot take another step. It's completely overwhelming." I would totally believe it. And then the thought 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—because I'd ask myself, "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. 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 from, "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 mentioned before, 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 isn't happening.

And then something clicks in: "Oh no, how could I live my life like that? What about me?" Let's put on that old coat again that's so familiar, that's 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. "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?

Chogyam 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, is really 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.

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, and we want to know, it just freaks us out. "I want to know what's going on. Don't tell me it's unknowable. I want some sense of certainty."

And so that's when bringing in the sense of resolution becomes essential—not about an expectation or "this will happen," but just to have this sense of broad aspiration, knowing that these scary experiences, these difficult experiences, these uncomfortable experiences, these not-knowing experiences, whatever comes from the inside or the outside—it's 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—it's very subtle, and 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 yours yesterday compared to today. But we compare because we want some kind of certainty. No. Just this.

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 this courage, with this not shrinking back from whatever happens, whether external circumstances or internal, is a wonderful support on our path. 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—the Chan 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 at his place in upstate New York. He was 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. So 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 1920s or 30s, I don't remember exactly. Very, very poor, a lot of privation. And 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 1920s and 30s on, there was civil war in China. Great hardship, often hard to have anything to eat, lots of privation. In 1949, when the Civil War ended and basically the Communists took over, he realized that no one was going to be allowed to remain monks 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 he's a monk, a deeply committed Buddhist monk, but he knew he couldn't remain one staying in China. He did what he needed to do, which was to join the Taiwanese army and go 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 and say, "Okay, thanks, you guys. Now I'm checking out." He couldn't get out of the army, 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. He performed 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 a lot 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 he was going to die, and 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, doing prostrations was a great way of purifying his heart and mind, so he did endless prostrations

to purify what he thought were his unwholesome actions. That was his commitment, his way.

He found a way out after ten years of having no teacher, no other support to be a monk. He was living as a secret monk in the army. This is from him, 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 his particular branch of military service was nearly impossible.

But he had such dedication. He would spend every little short vacation he had going to find a Buddhist master and study with him in 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, the quality of aspiration and determination.

As Thanissaro Bhikkhu says—for me that story highlights this—in terms of determination, there is 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 having a sense of what's a deep and wise determination, resolution, aspiration for you in your life, in your practice. Don't feel too caught in a sense of self to shrink back from this. 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, and each supports the next.

Having a sense of 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 the heck you're doing it. It gets kind of dry and dull, or we're doing it to become more mindful. Why? Why exactly do I want to be more mindful?

And sometimes having a 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 that was 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. And 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.

And 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 alert for that they would be arrested, their family 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 circumstances came, the sense of determination was just flexible with those circumstances while really holding true to what is the key, what's most important, what helps them wake up.

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

And then each moment, it's 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's 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 at the very end they allowed the women videoing to go up and see the oldest nun, who they said is the most enlightened of all of us. She was lying in a little bed—and I mean, who knows, she looked a hundred and twenty, maybe she was forty, but she looked really old and had a really

hard life. She couldn't walk anymore, so she just lay in that bed spinning her prayer wheel. Just one of those beings, you know, where 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 ways. 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 so 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, 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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