

New Year Resolutions and the Third Maxim

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Resolve is one of the ten ‘Perfections’, the virtues developed by the spiritual life. We perfect resolve by practicing it and I’ve learned a lot from working with the resolution not to eat after 7pm. I undertook this mainly to practice the third of the six maxims suggested to fortify ourselves for the consequences of climate change. This maxim asks us to draw our red lines. When poverty, hunger, homelessness come to our own doorstep, what will we not stoop to as we struggle to adapt and survive? Last month’s tip looked at this from the point of view of Buddhist ethics. These provide the rationale for whatever red-lines we draw. New Year resolutions present the perfect opportunity to strengthen our resolve to keep within these when things get really tough. The monastic rule not to eat after mid-day has always been a challenge for me. I manage OK during retreats, but as a way of life it’s been a step too far. I eat something at tea-time for health reasons, but the 7pm red line means I can’t indulge the comforting delight of end-of-day snacking. The practice has been an eye-opener! The precepts are described as ‘Training Rules’ so I’ve never seen them as commandments. When I started to think of 7pm as a serious red line an inner despot emerged, locked me into a straight-jacket in anticipation of bad behaviour! In time a few chinks loosened, and I could enjoy watching the despot dismiss temptations before they had even a remote chance of success. But after a week or so resolve waned and temptation got stronger. I recognised this as the point where previous resolutions had been quietly put aside. The usual excuse popped up “You’re so hungry ... you’ll never be able to sleep...” tapping into a barely voiced undercurrent: “Ah go on, give in, what does it matter?” Hard to resist this familiar, comforting laziness. I reminded myself of the wider context: climate change, competition for food, water, shelter; how violence erupts when scarcity threatens; how to avoid back-sliding into savagery; the need to be strong, heroic even, to choose good over evil. Also, that I was going to have to write up my experience in this tip, admit to my transgressions! These thoughts were enough to reinvigorate resolve. It boosted my confidence to have held fast when I would previously have given in. Joy arose and I warmed to the practice. I kept an emergency banana by my bed in case the usual excuse proved valid, but happily I slept soundly. It simplified matters to have an absolute rule to cleave to. It also removed the guilt of indulging night-time comfort-food. Such a relief. Then one evening, out of the blue, I just gave in. I had been feeling out of sorts, fractious; as soon as temptation arose, I capitulated, didn’t even try to argue. Afterwards, somewhat shocked and ashamed at having crossed the red line, I reflected on the experience, remembering the savage energy desire had evoked and how instantly I had caved in. Contemplating this, a new level of resolve took shape, based on aversion to being enslaved by such a brute, unthinking, force. This has been enough to get me through subsequent temptations ... so far anyhow. Resolve is an on-going practice, and I’ll welcome its on-going lessons. I’d urge you to see your New Year resolutions in the light of the ‘Red Lines’ maxim. Reflect on how much resolve you may one day need

to resist harming another because of hunger or other basic need. Let others know of your resolution - the embarrassment of public failure increases motivation! Watch temptations mindfully so as to learn how to resist future, more serious temptations to betray your inner goodness, your true nature.

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