

Discernment & Determination

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Determination is one of the perfections. It's the perfection that sets a goal and decides to see it through. It's aided by some of the other perfections like patience, endurance, and truthfulness. In fact the Buddha, when he talked about determination, said there are four qualities needed to see it through—to engender even the desire that you want to take a determination—and to make sure that it succeeds.

The four are discernment, truth, generosity, and calm. Notice that discernment comes first because the discernment is what sees there's a certain job that needs to be done—a quality that needs to be developed or certain qualities that need to be overcome—something to be accomplished. We're not just sitting here enjoying the present moment. The present moment is a means to something higher, something better. It requires discernment to see that and also to figure out where to aim and how to get to where you aim.

First, you've got to choose a good goal. Make sure that you determine on something that really will pay off, something that really will be beneficial. Then you've got to figure out how to do it, both in the sense of the steps that need to be done, and also in how to get yourself motivated—because you know what works in getting your mind to act.

If you don't know what works with your mind, try to find out. If you feel intimidated by how large the task may be and daunted by it, try to break it down into small steps. In other words, figure out what's the first thing that needs to be done, and what's the next thing that needs to be done. Well, just do that one thing and then the next thing. Take it one step at a time.

I found in my own case that if I have a new project to work on and it seems intimidating, the first day I work on it will be toward the end of my work period when I have only half an hour or 15 minutes left. That way, I don't have very high expectations about what's going to be accomplished. When the expectations aren't so high, then you find that you can do something. It's when your expectations are too high that you feel overwhelmed.

Like when you're meditating on the breath right now: If you think you're going to be here for the whole hour or for the whole night, that's too much to take. You say, "I've got this one breath. Okay, now this breath, and now this breath." Take it one breath at a time. Be responsible for right now. You don't have to be responsible for the rest of the hour. Take responsibility for what you're

doing right now. The step that can be done right now: Focus on that. And when that's done, you find that you've picked up a little bit of momentum. You can move on to the next step, and then the next.

So this is part of discernment, figuring out where your inner obstacles are, what they are, and how you can get around them. But that, of course, requires having some knowledge about what needs to be done and also some different techniques for motivation. Sometimes you find yourself motivated by a sense of heedfulness—in other words, realizing that if you don't do the job now, it's not going to get easier as time goes on. And if you don't do it yourself, nobody else is going to do it for you.

We have that phrase in the chant, “May all beings look after themselves with ease.” And I've noticed a lot of people whose Dhamma practice falls off to the wayside because they don't know how to look after themselves in the sense of maintaining their motivation, their fighting spirit, their sense of what needs to be done—and also, how to look after themselves to make sure they're doing well, not pressing themselves too hard or letting themselves off too easy. If you get slack on things, then in those slack mind-states all kinds of other things can sneak in. And you suddenly find your inner conversation changing. So you have to be very careful about who gets admitted into the committee inside and who has a voice in the committee.

These are all different factors of discernment that can help you with the remaining factors—like truth. Truth means you make up your mind to do something and you really do it. This is one of the qualities of the great ajaans. Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Maha Boowa talk a lot about the vows they would make in their practice. They found that it would be difficult in the beginning. But as you got more used to it, it became easier as you went along.

Again, it's a matter of momentum. In your momentum, if you're sitting still, there's a tendency just to sit still. But if you start moving, then it's easy to keep moving at that same speed. You push a little bit more and you get faster. You push a little bit more and you get faster. So the first oomph is sometimes the hardest of all. Once you get going, then it's necessary that you maintain it because momentum can run out. You've got to figure out ways of keeping yourself nourished as you practice so you really stick with things.

Here it's good to have a sense of honor. You don't hear much about the word “honor” in Dhamma circles. It's essentially a sense of how you feel you look in other people's eyes. Now there's a way in which we're not supposed to be concerned about that. You notice especially when you go out in the forest and you're alone. You realize that the opinions of a lot of people who used to be

around you just fade away at that point. But you don't want everybody to fade away. You don't want the noble ones to fade away; you don't want the wise to fade away. You want to think about them. The Buddha recommends that you think about the wise people who have powers and can read your mind. How do you look in their eyes? That's a way of making sure you stay on the path.

When he talked to the Kalamas, he said not only to test things by how they give results when you put them into practice, but also to test them against the opinions of the wise. You take those opinions into consideration. You don't take not your own measurement of things. You want to take on the standards of the wise, and you want to live up to their standards. You take their advice seriously.

One of the reflections that the Buddha recommends is that you ask yourself every day, "Is there anything in my own behavior that I can criticize?" Then he goes on from there, "Is there anything that those who know, those who are observant, that *they* could criticize?" Sow that sense that they're watching you, and you want to look good in their eyes. After all, we're trying to get in a position where, the Buddha said, we have precepts that are pleasing to the noble ones. In other words, if they saw what we were doing, they would be pleased by our actions. That's one of the ways of keeping yourself going on the path, maintaining your truth in sticking with your vow.

As for generosity, it basically means giving up things that get in the way and learning how to do that with a sense of calm. Those two go together. If you get worked up about how you're going to have to give this up or face that hardship, try to calm the mind and say, "Okay, I can do this. This is not beyond human capability and not beyond my capability." So whatever voices inside get in the way, whatever likes you have that you're going to have to abandon, remind yourself you can do without those things.

This is why it's good to test yourself in the practice. Can you do without x for a couple of days? Can you do without y for a couple of days? Can you fast for a couple of days? Can you go without speaking to people for a couple of days? Whatever the job, can you just sit down and do it, to see it all the way through, and give up whatever gets in the way?

An important part of that is calming your mind with the realization that this is no big deal. This is nothing overwhelming. Because if you get all worked up about the things you have to give up, that makes it harder and harder for them to be given up. And as for getting worked up about it, that was the problem to begin with. So try to calm the mind and give up any attitudes that would get in the way. Learn to identify them as separate voices in the mind, voices that you don't have to identify with.

This is where the discernment comes in again. It informs all of these qualities. To be truthful, you have to know how to think about maintaining things—how to set a pace that you can maintain, how to give yourself encouragement along the way, and how to use that sense of honor. I was reading recently someone saying that the Buddha’s instructions on maintaining celibacy have to do a lot with the embarrassment you would feel if you stopped—and other people’s opinions of you if you stopped. Someone else was saying, “This is really wrong. You shouldn’t be concerned about other people’s opinions. That’s a matter of conceit.” Well, no it’s not. It’s a matter of honor and also a sense of shame, which the Buddha said is an important element on the path.

You’d be ashamed to do something that would look bad in the eyes of the noble ones. That’s an element of discernment that’s useful in maintaining truth. It requires discernment to see the things that you have to give up and to calm the mind in order to be willing to give them up with a sense of ease and a sense that you’re not being asked to do anything superhuman.

Discernment underlies all of these things. It’s the planner. It’s the motivator. It’s the part of the mind that sets the goals and learns how to foster all the other qualities that will see them through. So if you find yourself having trouble embarking on a task or keeping up your momentum, look into the various ways that your discernment isn’t working right now. It’s not that you don’t have discernment. It’s just a question of putting it to use.

This is one of the reasons why, when I translate the word *pañña* into English, I find that “discernment” is the best equivalent, better than “wisdom.” One time, Ajaan Fuang told me to use my *pañña* when I was having problems in meditation. And I told him the reason I’m meditating is because I don’t have any *pañña*, thinking that it meant wisdom. He said, “No, everybody’s born with some. It’s simply a question of whether you’re willing to use it or not.”

So even though we may not all be wise, we at least have some discernment. And the discernment gets better as you use it, as you employ it in setting good goals, figuring out what needs to be done, deciding how you can encourage yourself to do it, learning how you don’t have to be overwhelmed, maintaining your ability to be truthful to give up the things that get in the way, and keeping the mind calm through all of this.

When you put your discernment to use, it grows. Then it can do all of these things and see you all the way through.